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THE GUARDIANS

BY THE AUTHORS OF "A YEAR IN EDEN," AND "A QUESTION OF IDENTITY"

" τυφλός δέ τυφλον έὰν όδηγη "



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THE GUARDIANS.

CHAPTER I.

"And you are made the guardian of these girls?"

" Yes."

" Alone?"

"Not exactly. There is an old judge, who, I believe, drew both wills, and who was finally associated."

The scene was the veranda of a seaside cottage on a sultry, pallid, August afternoon. The inquirer, whose questions, by the way, were usually put in the form of assertions, was a plain, but resolute and distinguished-looking middle-aged woman. The other was a man, and young; that is to say, he was really past thirty, but every outward grace of youth still glorified form and feature, and he had that inordinate personal beauty for which one of his sex seems almost to owe an apology to the modern world. A good head, well-proportioned limbs, and a gallant bearing are all very well, and so are clear-cut features and fine, strong teeth; but lips tender as Antinous' own, only

not quite so sensuous; eyes veritably violet, and in their look bright, and haughty, and unfathomably sad by turns; a low, white forehead, singularly framed in a growth of cloudy blonde hair, — such things require shadowy plumes, Venice point and jeweled hilts, and black velvet slashed with pale blue satin. What business with the like has any man in this practical and plain-clad century?

This was the very thought of Adonis' half-sister, as she sat upright and regarded the graceful figure stretched in the low lounging-chair, just where it had been dejectedly flung, a quarter of an hour before, when Amory Wallis came home from a sudden and painful journey. Mrs. Rothery knew very well that the journey had been painful, — trying, she called it, — but exactly how "trying" she could not have known if she would, and she was also predetermined not fully to understand.

So she clearly accounted to Amory — who was after all her nearest approach to a pet — for his mortal pallor and fatigue, on the grounds of night-travel and "dog-day" weather, and had a sherry-cobbler quietly served him on the veranda. But when he had impatiently declined this or any refreshment, Mrs. Rothery reflected that certain things would have to be talked over some time, once for all she devoutly hoped, and that the present might be the best as well as the earliest opportunity. Hence the inquiry with which this story somewhat abruptly began, and hence the colloquy which follows: —

- "What are the children's ages?"
- "Eleven and thirteen."
- "Good Heavens! How can they be so old?"
- "Oh, I can very well realize the number of their years." The words were accompanied by a slight, bitter smile and a look of ineffable sorrow. It was an appealing look, and would have wrung a very sympathetic or susceptible heart. It moved, but did not wring, Jane Rothery's. She only said with rather studied carelessness:—
 - "And you mean to accept?"
 - "Accept what?"
 - "The guardianship, the responsibility."
- "I should scorn myself, if I could consider that I have a choice! -Am I likely to refuse any request of hers which"— He stopped short, and turned whiter than ever about the shapely lips, which, however, he had the resolution firmly to compress.

The lady watched him attentively, and a little sternly. "It seems to me," she said in measured tones, "that the request was injudicious and improper. I suppose," she went on, disregarding his gesture of interdiction, "that the children are very rich?"

"They have the possibility of great wealth," he answered, with an evident effort; "but the property is involved, some of it is already in litigation, and a good deal of it is in lands whose ultimate value cannot be predicted."

"And you are neither a lawyer, nor in any sense

a man of affairs! Amory, it was a piece of sheer sentimentalism on that woman's part—simply incredible and unpardonable in the mother of girls of that age—to leave her daughters on your hands! You can't take suitable care of their interests. You—you are not nearly enough older than they! It is only perpetuating the entanglement which has hampered your life and paralyzed your whole career."

"Must I beg of you to spare me?"

Fond as Jane Rothery was of him, she could hardly repress a sneer, but she tried. "Of course," she said, "I know that you are a good deal moved just now. It is quite natural. But you had better listen to reason before it is too late."

"You are not losing any time, certainly."

"And never intended to," thought Mrs. Rothery; but aloud she said: "Just answer me two or three questions. You wrote so wildly and vaguely; but I felt for you in my way, and I want to know. Did you have any talk yourself with—with—Cornelia?"

After all, he could not, in those days, exist, least of all under such a stress, without confidence, épanchement de cœur, either verbal or literary; and grudging and politic though he felt the sympathy thus offered him to be, he grasped at it.

"No talk," he said, in a low voice, which he succeeded in keeping steady by an effort which even his listener rather respected. "She was far past

that when I was taken into the great, staring chamber." He shuddered, as a waft of the atmosphere of that room seemed to come back over his dainty sense. "Everything had been stripped down and moved away that could obstruct the air, you know, or incommode. It was a black, rainy night outside, but all the windows were open. How the lights flared! She - Good God! was it she, sitting up there against the pillows, so frightfully wasted and distorted, - so old? I never should have known her. Only the long, black hair unchanged. Her lips were drawn into a dreadful smile. It seemed as if her soul scorned and spurned the receding life to which the blind instinct of her poor frame alone clung pitiably. But she knew me, and gave me one look out of her great eyes, and then turned them on the little girls who were sobbing upon the bed. I minded even then that one sobbed fiercely and the other quietly. They are very splendid creatures. I seized her poor hands and kissed her once, but her clutch of mine was the beginning of the last struggle. There were some women about, - nurses, I suppose, and a doctor, - and a parson who looked like a priest. Somebody kept fanning. No doubt they were watching us. They saw little enough, Heaven knows - and heard nothing."

His utterance became choked, and Mrs. Rothery drew forth a fine fresh pocket handkerchief, shook it out, and wiped away one scanty tear. She waited in silence for a few decent seconds, and

then pursued her inquiry. "That of course was the evening of Wednesday?"

"I don't know what day it was," he answered; and I have not known since."

"But you heard nothing of her arrangements until the will was read?"

He winced under the hardness of his examiner, but he must talk. "That same night," he went on, "just after I had locked myself into a hideous state bed-chamber, there was a little tap on my door. I did not answer directly, for I thought it was some prying servant, but it came again, 'a light, light finger,' like that which called Hildebrand to his rest, and I opened the door. And there, trembling much, but not crying any longer, was the older of the two girls - the one who is most like her. She said, very simply, 'I knew you would not have gone to bed so soon. Please let me come in.' I opened the door mechanically, and I suppose held it open, for she took it gently out of my hand and shut it behind her, when she entered. Then she held out to me a little leather writing-case with a key. 'I was to give you this,' she said, 'when nobody saw. Mamma told me to, — oh, it was only yesterday!' All the awfulness and anguish of that thought seemed to come over her, and she threw up her little hands, and broke into sobbing again, perfectly stifled, though, and noiseless. I had to try and comfort her."

Mrs. Rothery heard with an involuntary grimace, which the painfully absorbed narrator did not notice as he hurried on.

"Just as soon as she could speak she said: 'There is a note in there where I wrote what mamma told me. She said you would read that first; and some time, perhaps, you would read the other things. Now let me go.' I led her to the door, and, I suppose, hesitated for an instant, for she said - that child! reading my thoughts just as — as she used to do, 'There won't be anybody about. I thought of that. Good-night, sir,' and she vanished like a spirit. I looked in the portfolio at once. The note of which the little maid had spoken lay loose between the two halves, and it was written in a stiff, large hand, and words few enough to say, since I was like to be too late, that the children were left to me, and that she would trust me in heaven to make sacred use of her legacy. I have never looked further among the papers. God knows if I shall ever dare. you must see that there is no question of accepting or declining."

There was an uncontrollable working of the smaller muscles about Jane Rothery's nostrils, which she thought it expedient to conceal by once more lifting her handkerchief. After a little silence she said, if possible, more dryly than ever:—

"Were there no Curwen relatives about, not even when the will was read?"

"Oh, yes," was the negligent answer, "more or less people were there, and there was some consternation; but I believe the thing is quite sound." "Where are the children now? What is to be done with them immediately?"

"Oh, they are there."

"Yes, but in whose care? The establishment does n't run itself, I suppose."

"There are servants, and a housekeeper; or rather a sort of governess or companion. Good Lord, Jane! I know all these things are to be thought of, and you must help me. It was absolutely necessary for me to come home first of all and rest a little, and reflect. You don't seem to realize that I have suffered. And I don't suppose you would have wished me to bring the little girls here without first consulting you."

"Here, Amory? There are a great many objections to bringing them here. To begin with the least, the house is not large enough."

"We could add a room or two. I thought of that. What are your other objections?"

She could not quite say in so many words, "Because they, most likely, are precocious girls, and you a kind of perpetual boy, — a sensitive and romantic, if, as you just now fondly suppose, heartbroken boy, and you could not possibly live together at present without the speedy end of awe on their side and authority on yours." She therefore hesitated a moment, and then answered more oracularly: "Because you have no more idea what it would involve than you have of the business cares thus unpardonably laid upon you."

The look which came over his face startled even

her so much that she stopped abruptly and said:

"Amory, are you really feeling ill?"

"Not ill in body," he answered; "but I am so deadly sick at heart that"— he leaped up impetuously, with a fiery flush in his face—"that, if you please, I'll excuse myself from listening any longer, at present, to your d—d common sense."

And so he left her.

CHAPTER II.

"THE longer we float along the stream of life, the better we begin to understand the fable of the vessel of iron and the vessel of clay; and if incompetent to convert our fragile materials into sterner stuff, the farther we recede from contact with the harsh and powerful, the better."

The truth of this remark by a clever anonymous writer, whom everybody read a generation ago, and almost everybody has now forgotten, is perhaps oftenest exemplified in the relation of husband and wife. In the case of the two people just introduced to the reader, it was illustrated by sister and brother. It is not often, however, in the power, even if it be in the courage, of a married pair to heed the hint which accompanies the reflection. And with these two, the force of habit, and, on the part of the more sensitive nature, the sacred authority of old, but very real obligations would have made a divorce equally difficult. Moreover, in this, as in all near associations of really incompatible natures, the more obvious, if not the more fatal detriment was to the weaker party, - the one less likely to declare itself independent.

But this is beginning at the wrong point to account for the unusually close relation between Jane Rothery and her half-brother.

It was a relation which their world, the married and settled portion of it at least, approved with uncommon unanimity. "It gives her a respectable establishment, — two in fact, — without a husband, and I rather think the late Rothery would tell you that nothing could suit her better. On the other hand, she takes a great deal better care of him and his money than he would ever take himself, — a visionary spendthrift sort of fellow. He's no Crœsus, but all the property there is belongs to him; came through the Wallises, you know. The Lippincotts were poor, and had no particular right to be proud, and she married a clergyman, whom she soon trained to death. It was just about the time of that frantic love affair of Amory Wallis's. He really did come near dying, — was ill a year, some people said actually crazed; at all events, he saw no one, and she took admirable care of him, and has administered him, so to speak, ever since."

Thus the comfortable world, concerning a great tragedy, and its practical consequences.

Is the expression "a great tragedy" too strong? What makes the greatness of any human experience, save the intensity with which it is felt, its revolutionizing effects? About fifteen years before the opening of this tale, two young and richly endowed beings had met, in summer, amid noble scenes, and had loved as the poets have been fabled to love, not like the dull majority of human kind. The universe was transfigured about these two;

the meaning of life became luminously plain, and every other mode of human existence, vaguely apprehended through the mists of their rapturous dream, seemed to partake of the overflow of their own consummate and glorious well-being. To these divinely distinguished creatures, in that strange and ever-memorable summer time, there came the last and highest born of early love: the annihilation of self-consciousness, its transmutation into a simple consciousness of the adored object,—a boon which has won poignant recognition from one even of the most selfish and sensuous of poet-lovers:—

"Comprends-tu qu'un bien qui dans l'âme immortelle, Chaque jour plus profond, se forme à notre insu Qui déracine en nous, la volonté rebelle."

In the complex and infinite anguish which follows the loss of such a love, no pang is more bewildering than that with which one receives back what he had felt almost deified in giving, and bows once more to the inalienable doom of selfpossession.

And the love of which I speak was lost; that is, it came to no fruition of earthly content. No need to tell the petty particulars of the story. The boy had many flatterers, and the girl had other suitors. Both were fiery, and one, the girl, exceptionally haughty and exacting. Those who stood in the place of natural guardians to both—for unhappily, both were without parents—had other views for them, and wickedly fostered their

over now, and the tide of life had carried their persons three thousand miles asunder. Finally there came to divide their plighted faith deliberate intrigue and positive treachery, whereof, alas, the unscrupulous man was not guiltless whom Cornelia Mears, in a transport of hot indignation, wounded pride, and disappointed trust, accepted as a suitor, and married, in blind despite, at the residence of the American Minister at Brussels. Chance discovered to the already heart-sickening bride of two months the whole dishonorable story, and almost at the same time came a rumor that Amory Wallis was dying in America.

Why drag again into the light of day, and vainly endeavor artfully to set forth, the intolerable anguish of that high-spirited and impassioned young creature, so suddenly made old, and now so long at rest? There is no need to do more than to speak of those things which illustrate the peculiarities of her character.

There was never a scene between her and Robert Curwen, her unworthy husband. She never even told him that she knew the whole; and he, though a resolute and regardless man, and in other respects no coward, never dared to question her. She was capable of a very singular severity, almost cruelty, of self-condemnation. Her impressible young lover had indeed been vain and weak, and accessible to flatteries which he himself despised; but he had not been untrue; and she not merely

acquitted him wholly, but restored him, without scruple, to the splendid sanctuary of her inmost worship. But she herself had failed in faith, and even in the midst of her first agony she pronounced sentence upon herself that all the immeasurable misery of her present and future lot was less than an adequate punishment for such a sin. She would therefore render a scrupulous "obedience," not so much to that other man, as to the law which united them, and under whose hard bondage she had come by her own rash act; and having done so much, she reasoned - for she was so made that in the intervals of her fiercest paroxysms she could reason, clearly if erroneously — that all her "love" and "honor," her dreams, imaginations, and regrets were simply due where they had first been pledged. and never, so she thought with bitter exultation, forfeited.

It would be difficult to say just how she reconciled this adjustment of her ruined possibilities with the thought of God, for, like every unhappy lover since the world began, she turned instantly, and with something like a fierce demand for recompense, to the divine; but such reconcilement was accomplished, and in the strict and increasingly ascetic observance of her religious duties, she found, first, an aid to self-restraint, and later something which she called consolation. She fully believed that Heaven saw and sanctioned the divorce between her affections and her formal allegiance.

This is not an attempted defense of her, but

merely the outlines of her emotional and spiritual history. The form of religion to which she inclined was Roman, although she never went beyond ritualism. She had a daughter within a year after her marriage whom she named Ruth, and another two years later whom she named Constance. Both names were distasteful to the father of the babes, although he did not much attend to them, and hardly knew why they displeased him; and both were selected and bestowed under all the sanctions of the church, with secret reference to the man who was not their father.

Mrs. Curwen's life was a distracting and weariful one. Her husband was engaged in large commercial enterprises, which required his presence successively in widely remote parts of the globe, and he always took her with him. They lived in Calcutta, they visited Japan, they sojourned for a while in New Orleans, in Constantinople, in San Francisco. Both the little girls were born in the tropics, and they were precocious children, with the fervor of their birthplace in their veins. But the elder had, from the first, more of the languor of tropic lands, while the younger seemed to have imbibed the untamable activity of the sea, which had cradled her infancy.

Before either was fairly out of her infantile years, the health of the young mother had broken down under the strain imposed upon it. Wise physicians advised a return to her native air, but the suggestion was waived. The one prescription

which might have prolonged his wife's existence here Robert Curwen did not follow immediately; must we say that he refused to follow it? But finally, in the spring of that year, they had come to New York; and Mr. Curwen had abruptly purchased, at what he considered a bargain, a pompous, furnished country-seat upon the Hudson,—"for me to die in," as Mrs. Curwen herself said to the mature and highly organized little Ruth, too early, if not too far, her confidant.

But Cornelia Curwen survived her husband. He was killed by a stroke of lightning, in the vestibule of a New York club-house, a few weeks after their arrival in America, and the first look into his complex affairs disclosed the wholly unexpected fact that he had executed a will at the time of his marriage, leaving unreservedly to his wife all property of which he might die possessed.

To the suffering woman into whose feeble hands so vast a responsibility now fell, the shock of this discovery was almost equal to that of her unloved husband's sudden and terrible end. She knew how little she had enjoyed his confidence in recent years. She knew, in truth, how little she had deserved it. There was a kind of dumb reproach even in that low impulse towards restitution for her great wrong, — although it was an impulse of which the testator had long since repented, and fully resolved to undo the effects; only, as so often happens, he had neglected it. The elderly judge who had drawn and deposited Robert Curwen's will fourteen years be-

fore, having heard of the young widow's invalid state, went at once to see her, in the great countryhouse, amid the neglected gardens. To his experienced eye, no less than to those of her physicians, there was death in her own face; yet, for the instant, the blow which she had received seemed not to have prostrated, but rather braced and strangely exalted her. She arose from the couch, from which she had hardly lifted her weary head since her coming to her native land; and, to the amazement, and somewhat to the awe, of those around her, dropped many of her invalid habits. She was, in fact, buoyed up by a fictitious strength to execute a certain vehement purpose. Before administering on her husband's estate, which she declared herself both able and resolved to do, she told Judge Ford that she would make her own will. It seemed so right a purpose, and one to which the circumstances gave something even of solemn urgency, that he could only approve it; yet the penetrating old man, who had a pitiful heart under his professional exterior, divined, beyond a doubt, that this fevered and shattered, though unquestionably sane woman had a secret; and he delayed, so far as he dared, the execution of her desires, in the hope that she might be unconsciously won to confide in him.

The preliminaries only of her plan had been arranged, when her new adviser was forced to leave her for a week's absence in a distant State, which he regretted, yet not entirely. But in that short interval, the inevitable reaction came. The mal-

ady which the poor, indomitable creature seemed, by a more than human effort, actually to have thrown off, returned with overwhelming violence, and she needed no word or look from those about her to tell her that the end had indeed come. She had been sadly friendless in her headstrong girlhood, and, save her idolized little ones, she had only hirelings about her now. But tenacious to the last, she summoned a local lawyer; the work so deliberately begun was hastily completed and witnessed, and all her possessions bequeathed to Amory Wallis, in trust for Ruth and Constance Curwen. Only at the very last did some blind impulse of maternal prudence lead her to associate Judge Ford, of whom she really knew so little, in the guardianship of her girls. One thing more she did, a day later, when her strength had yet farther declined. She summoned Amory Wallis by telegraph, and then gave herself into the hands of the clergyman.

Judge Ford felt a pang of regret, the poignancy of which surprised himself, when he heard that all was over. His life had naturally shown him all sorts of romantic complications, and he knew much of the most miserable side of such; and the moment his eye fell on the ideal head and shapely frame of his most unhappy coadjutor, the old lawyer said to himself, " That is an old lover;" and he contemplated the vista opening before himself with anything but gratification.

For all his fiery determination to fulfill the uttermost fancy of the woman whom he had loved, Amory Wallis can hardly be said to have contemplated the actual prospect at all.

Of those two, so harshly and sadly parted, he seemed outwardly to have suffered least, as he had least deserved to suffer; yet the whole consequences of that early disappointment had perhaps been quite as detrimental to the man as to the woman. Nature had, in fact, given him, in the highest degree in which it is ever bestowed, a capacity for suffering, through the affections, an unmixed anguish tempered neither by pride nor wrath; and in the first year of his bereavement, — that is, after Cornelia's marriage, — he verily thought, and so did the few people who were allowed to see him, that he must die of the wound which he had received.

His elder sister, the energetic woman whose natural place it became to nurse him through the nervous malady which laid him low, performed the material part of her duty in the most admirable and triumphant manner. She saved his life, unquestionably, and perhaps his reason; but she established a sway over his mind and movements of which he did not afterwards become independent. When he began to mend, they traveled for a year, Mrs Rothery skillfully arranging their route so that there should be no danger of an encounter with the Curwens; and when they came home they adopted, as a matter of course, the plan of living together. Amory built the small seaside cottage where we saw them first, and Mrs. Rothery

brought her practical genius to bear on the problems of construction with such effect that they had a home which was a miracle of economic elegance, and the most studied and scientific physical comfort. In the winter they rented an apartment in town, which the same genius for internal improvements made the most habitable of all apartments; and so they lived from year to year.

The past was hardly ever named between them; and Mrs. Rothery chose to believe that Amory had been wise enough to forget. There were some things which seemed to support such a persuasion. He was exceedingly amiable, and when he had once returned to the world, he was soon on outwardly good terms with society, and rather particularly so with the feminine portion of it. Mrs. Rothery was a person of superabundant energy both of muscle and conviction, and by contrast with her, he appeared indolent and indifferent. Yet when, after having arranged her own earthly habitations quite to her mind, Mrs. Rothery applied her spare forces to schemes of practical benevolence, Amory was almost always ready to further her ends to the full extent of his own means; and when she adopted views, and espoused causes, he liked a little whimsical verbal contention with her no doubt, but in the end he usually prepared her circulars, and put his name to her petitions.

Nor must all mention be omitted of the not very illustrious literary work of our dilettante and somewhat unheroic hero. He published a charming

little account of a month in the Basque provinces, and a thin but dainty volume of poems, which may still be seen upon all domestic book-shelves of a certain grade of costliness. There were strains of extreme sweetness and melancholy in these refined and correct little lyrics; and one by one, as they were contributed to the magazines, they were rapturously lauded, and made much talk of other poets, especially of Shelley, and Heine, and Alfred de Musset. Yet somehow, when collected, they seemed less effective than apart, and their physiognomy was found not easy to remember.

The young author himself had taste and literary discernment, and a sufficiently sincere disenchantment with life and its rewards, to think very lightly of his own productions. As he came by degrees to realize the wide contrast of temperament, the impossibility of deep sympathy between himself and the ruling spirit who made him so comfortable, he grew much more reticent about his inner life than nature had inclined him to be. He walled off, so to speak, from the smooth lawns of his ordinary existence, a silent burial-place, where he might sit unnoticed by the grave of his early hopes; and the life which he lived in that retreat was quite as real as the other, and constituted a far larger fraction of the whole than one who knew him but casually would have supposed. Doubtless, the sorrow of this man had assumed a tranquil and dreamy type, with even a touch of luxury. memorial services had come to consist mainly

in the culture of rare flowers around his guarded grave; and Mrs. Rothery thought the floral decorations entirely harmless, and was quite willing to have Amory just faithful enough to his early love to preclude his marrying another, which would greatly have disturbed her own arrangements.

But now the seeming equilibrium of content, sad on the one hand, and selfish on the other, was disturbed, as by an earthquake shock, and hidden things were upheaved. The spectacle of that speechless death-bed, the wreck of what had been so fair, the revelation of a sorrow fierce, active, and destructive, where his own had been so acquiescent and supine, smote Amory Wallis to his utmost capacity for imaginative distress and agonizing regret. Poor, faithful, culpable soul! snatched out of the reach of his or any earthly power to comfort. Always greater, he said to himself, but now so infinitely greater than he. As he paced his room in the dead hours of that breathless night, the sea being like glass, and a sickly shimmer of heat-lightning in the murky air, the man who was reckoned almost a Sybarite resented the thought of rest. "Sleep no more! Sleep no more!" was the refrain of his self-accusing wretchedness. spectre which had crossed his apathetic vision, he thought, had murdered sleep. "I have been sleeping for years," he said, "while she was awake, wrestling with fate, unforgetting, always pitiful of me. The quaint child's name was Ruth — her ruth for me." Then he remembered that he was at last summoned to act as well as to feel. "I have to be a man now," he reflected ironically. "Hitherto I have been only a poet."

The indolent and introspective habit of his life had rendered it absolutely necessary for him to turn his back, for the moment, on the pressing demands of his new position, on the courteous but cold and strenuous requisitions of Judge Ford, and to go through with this process of self-arraignment and adjustment. When something like calm had been recovered, he would go back and assume the charge so solemnly committed to him, and do his duty by her children.

But of the nature and details of that duty, no child could have had a vaguer conception than Amory Wallis.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. ROTHERY was in that state of mental plethora when the idea of talking to a man is to a woman merely maddening in its inadequacy. Nothing but a prolonged feminine colloquy could, she felt, afford her any relief.

This relief was vouchsafed her on the afternoon of the day succeeding Amory's mournful vigils. She was sitting alone on the veranda, vainly endeavoring to fix her mind on one of the heavier articles in the last "Westminster Review." The sun was blazing beyond the broad striped awning, creating a sweltering heat. The air was very still; not so much as a croquet-ball clicked upon a neighboring lawn. The waves plashed faintly upon the beach below the garden-wall.

Mrs. Rothery therefore heard at a considerable distance the light roll of phaeton-wheels, and having chosen, at an angle of the veranda, an advantageous seat, which commanded not only the seaward lawn and garden, but a considerable portion of the avenue on which the cottage was built, she was not long in discerning the scarlet fringes of a swaying umbrella, a shimmer of light draperies underneath it, and a glimmer of buttons from the small occupant of the rumble. The phaeton en-

tered their own short driveway and stopped. There was an order given in a soft staccato, a broad rustle and sweep along the veranda floor, and Mrs. Rothery laid aside her "Westminster" and rose to greet the apparition of which she had had an assured presentiment.

It was a lady, no longer young, but with the coloring of a year-old baby, and exceeding plump. Her costume, all of pale-blue woolen and white lace, the cataract of blonde curls descending beneath her white muslin hat, the moisture which made the curls cling tighter about her round, white forehead, the deep, damask-rose flush, as of a highly-tinted wax doll in her cherub cheeks, — all assisted the immensely infantile illusion. She pulled off her white driving-gloves from short, dimpled hands, dazzling with diamonds, extended one of these ornamental members to Mrs. Rothery in silence, and sank, with a slight gasp, into the nearest arm-chair.

"The heat," she murmured, "is simply appalling. No Christian ought to be out; but I felt that I must see you."

Mrs. Rothery handed her guest a fan, which the lady waved languidly two or three times, then lifted her head with unexpected energy, and stretched her neck to its brief utmost, in order to explore with her twinkling blue eyes both reaches of the veranda. Apparently not quite satisfied by her inspection, she turned to Mrs. Rothery, and inaudibly pronounced with her small pouting lips the mysterious monosyllable, "Where?"

"In his own room," replied Mrs. Rothery, in the wise and easy undertone which provokes no curiosity, "and, I sincerely trust, asleep. He promenaded all last night. Of course he is overcome. You and I know him. It was inevitable."

"Well," said the lady in blue, relapsing into languor, "tell me all."

"I only wish it were all to be told now; but there's plenty yet to come, as you will see. She never spoke after he arrived, but she has judiciously bequeathed her girls to him."

"Bequeathed? I don't understand. I thought they were great heiresses."

"So they are, or may be some day; and he is their guardian."

"No, my dear!" and the speaker dropped her fan, and clasped her plump hands. She pondered for a few seconds, and then said, "Poor soul! Are n't women pitiable and unaccountable?" Then she pondered a little longer, and her compassion suddenly gave way to amusement. Her flushed cheeks dimpled, and she lifted her light eyebrows archly as she added, "You will begin to wish now that you had let him marry me."

"My dear Estelle," answered Mrs. Rothery, a little stiffly, "I never opposed the slightest obstacle to his marrying you."

"Ah," said the blonde Estelle, with a shake of her curls, "I know all about it, and I don't in the least blame you. I dare say I should have done just the same in your place. It would have been preposterous in one way, you know. Six years my junior! No, seven, as I live!" (It was eight.) "How time flies! And undoubtedly it was a great deal better for me to make no such change. Whether it was better for him, or even for you, is another question. I never should have let you suffer, Jane; but you would not believe that. And how should you have known, when I first came here, that I was not petty and spiteful like other women?"

"It seems to me," remarked Mrs. Rothery with some impatience, for the ancient and rather mythical possibility of a marriage between her brother and this eccentric heiress was by no means what she had wanted to discuss, — "it seems to me that the fact that neither of you had any serious inclination towards the other ought to have had its weight in preventing such an arrangement."

"Oh, no! Not when I was already past thirty, and his heart quite broken! Then Reason asserts her sway. And I repeat that, on my own part, I have long rejoiced that I was bound by no such trammels. I have been so much more free to develop my higher faculties!" and she removed her airy hat, and began toying absently with the pale morning-glories which constituted its garniture. "Still, my interest in Amory is very sincere. So he is really terribly cut up?"

"He looks it, but he has not said much since the first hour after he arrived. He certainly does not eat, and I don't think he sleeps."

"If you need a physician, I solemnly charge you

to have this new one — Brixton. Amory's organization is so delicate that he can no more bear rude dosing than an infant. Of course you keep valerian on hand?" (Bromides were not then invented.) "I always do. Nothing else answers when I have been thinking hard or feeling intensely. Then she had already made her will. Bless me! How long is it since her husband was killed?"

"You must speak softly, because the windows are all open. Less than a month."

"She must have had her mind quite made up

for the contingency."

"It would appear so. You can imagine the miserable effect on Amory of learning, in such a way, what he must have been to her through all these years, when they had no communication! I say nothing about her. In old times we should have said, 'She has gone to her account.' And really it was a most satisfactory way of placing the responsibility of undoing these wretched tangles. I dare say she was unhappy. Almost all people are, I believe. But of course if he had been anything to her but her impossible girlish ideal, if she had had any notion what manner of man he really is, she would not have done this romantic thing."

"Pray had n't Mrs. Curwen any relatives of her

"None to speak of. A miserly old uncle, Richard Stone, the archæologist; you may have heard of him, — he is dead, by the way, — whose house she came to keep, and who first gave her the sort of in-

troduction to society which such a man may. He and an aunt or something, up in the wilds of New Hampshire, are all I remember to have heard of. Her prestige was entirely her own, but she made a great sensation for a year or two."

"What was her style?"

"Brunette — of the darkest type, flashing, imperial."

"There are very handsome brunettes," said Miss Ingestre, still caressing her azure hat trimmings, "though of course the blonde is the higher type, — moins matériel, n'est-ce pas? Do these children resemble her?"

"Oh, I have by no means asked how they look, as yet. He spoke of one of them being like her, but the child may be an Albino for all that. He is so distraught! Conceive his turning his back on them, children and lawyers and all, and running away to weep for a few days over the mother's picture as she used to be, and to ask my advice!"

"It is you who will be their guardian, after all, Jane Rothery. Poor little things!"

"I certainly have some clear views about the training of girls; and it will be well for these orphans if I can bring them to bear on their case. But I shall probably be thwarted by the imbecility of others. In the first place, there's another guardian."

"Oh, indeed! Who is he?"

"He seems to have been an after-thought, and I don't know if his powers are equal, or if they can

be unequal. I must look that up. It is one Judge Ford. I never heard of him."

"I have, then. 'Whom not to know,' etc. You forget that I am a New Yorker. I went to school with his daughter."

"He must be a very old man."

"Sixty-five, at least. Your bill is receipted, Jane. But he has no end of similar charges, so, very likely, he wont interfere much with your philanthropy."

"Do you know, Estelle," said Mrs. Rothery, for the rather grim good-nature of this oddly-assorted pair of friends was not merely proof against the light sprinkling of pepper which garnished their infinite discourse, but rather, as it seemed, preserved thereby, — "do you know that I am half tempted, in view of all things, freely to consent to having those children taken here to live? That is to say, I would not appear to do it too freely. I would have it understood by everybody as a favor on my part; but it would please me to see for once what a perfectly judicious education really can do. I would just like to know, whether two girls, even with the inheritance of romance, nonsense, and fashion which they probably have, cannot be trained into rational and self-sustaining beings."

"But why need they support themselves, if they are to have so much money?"

"I did not say self-supporting, but self-sustaining. I was thinking of their characters, their mental strength and independence. But I also think

that they should be able to get their own living if necessary, and who will guarantee them against it? So far as I can learn, this Curwen property is just of the sort which may vanish in smoke before they are of age. Imagine Amory sauntering and sonneteering through that sort of wilderness! Fortunately, I do know something. But the education I would give those girls," continued Mrs. Rothery, becoming a trifle oratorical, "would fit them to use wealth to some purpose, if they have it. At first, as I may say, I thought it would be out of the question to have them here, because Amory, especially in the relapse into poetry and wool which I rather apprehend, would be so little likely to secure their respect. But the more I think of it, the more it seems to me as if the opportunity were too rare a one to be lost."

The blonde sat silent and thoughtful for a few minutes, then she looked up with a sudden access of animation, and spiritedly struck one of her white gloves against the other. "It is a rare opportunity," she said, with a sort of deep and pointed emphasis on the "is," like one of her own dimples. "I begin to wish that I had it myself. Because, in some ways, I should be so much better for the friendless little things than you can be, Jane."

"There I do not agree with you."

"Of course not; but I should, all the same. Our views are quite similar, in some respects, about the training which girls ought to receive to make them effective women of the age; but there is this dif-

ference: I allow for the existence of the emotions and sensibilities, and you do not. It's quite natural, too, because I myself have loved and suffered, and you, by your own showing, never did."

"You don't carry any particular marks of it at present, my dear," said Mrs. Rothery, with that implied contempt for flesh which is so frequent a

weapon with the "lean and hungry" sort.

"That is precisely the point, don't you see? I have overcome; and I would teach them to overcome. You would only teach them to ignore; and the effects would probably be disastrous with such children as you describe."

"Please to remember that I know nothing about them, except that they are their mother's. But I am quite at a loss to imagine to what disasters I should expose them by cultivating their common sense."

"Ah, I would cultivate their common sense, too, a little, vulgar faculty though it be! And I would cultivate their higher reason also. Perhaps I might not be quite as strenuous as you about their merely manual accomplishments"—

"I dare say not!"

"But I am sure I should lay equal stress on their mental attainments, — art, science, — all that. Our permanent elevation, of course, is to come through these things. But I would never, never forget that they have hearts."

"Nor allow them to forget it! There, you see, Estelle, is where you would fail. You are really a good woman, though you do not invariably talk like one, and you have some sound views; but you do so dearly love a little mawkish sentimentality yourself! Well, at your age, and in your affluent circumstances, a little, of course, is harmless, if you like it. It's like a man's glass of wine at dinner after he's forty, retards waste, etc. But it don't lessen the objections to drunkenness in the young."

"Dear Mrs. Rothery, you are positively growing picturesque! After all, it is, and will be, the regular thing for girls to love, and even to marry."

"Who said they were not to marry? They probably will. But they are to marry without nonsense; just as much as I should prefer them to live single without nonsense, if such were their destiny. I would train them to be reasonable women, and, if need be, efficient wives. You would teach them to be accomplished women, and — what is it?—
'solitary souls.'"

"They had far better remain solitary,—out of the depths I cry it," sighed Estelle Ingestre, sinking lower in her arm-chair, and raising her eyes to the awning, "than be united to any but their true counterparts."

"Oh, Counterparts!" said Jane, with vigorous contempt. "How can you quote such lunatic trash?" For the rather remarkable book which the word suggested was some years younger then than now. "And how does this agree with what you said awhile ago, about making a marriage of convenience yourself with Amory?"

"Why, it agrees well enough! I am perfectly consistent. I said that, under all the circumstances, I being past the age of genuine romance, as you, my dear Jane, so frequently and candidly remind me, and he otherwise disqualified, a — a sort of 'dead beat,' I think they call it, — I did fancy for a time that it might be a good arrangement for him; although I very soon saw that it would not have answered for me."

"It is at least gratifying, Estelle," said Mrs. Rothery, smiling rather grimly, "to know that when you speak of having loved and suffered, you don't refer particularly to my brother."

"Particularly? Oh, no! very little; scarcely at all, in fact. I refer," said Miss Ingestre, playfully, yet pensively twirling the morning-glory hat, preparatory to resuming it, "to times and circumstances long anterior to the day when I first saw his Greek profile! Ah, if my own wayward fancy had only been properly restrained in youth, the vivacity of it might have been turned to some account! I am conscious of no feeling of vanity when I say that both emotionally and intellectually I had great possibilities. But there was no one to take supreme command of these irregular forces, to see that my mind was braced by severe study, to discern the natural bent of my genius (for everybody has a gift for something, you know), and to encourage it. I freely confess to feeling the lack of true mental discipline whenever I attempt to read anything hard. That 'Westminster' of yours reminds me — the article on 'Biological Speculation,' for instance "—

"I was looking over the one on 'The Intellectual Identity of the Sexes as a Factor in Future Educational Schemes,' which is very interesting, and by no means overtaxing."

"Ah, I glanced at that too, and possibly the man who wrote it has the right theory. But for boys and girls to go to school together seems to me so bourgeois! And it is pleasanter after all, is n't it, to think what one would do with the concrete little ones?"

"I suppose the discussion does no harm, if we do not allow ourselves to quarrel too violently over the details."

"Quarrel? you best of creatures, never! The thing is impossible! Don't use such a harsh word, I beg. I don't know how I could exist without you, and you know you could n't live without me. Hark!"

An awning was lifted and a blind lowered at the opposite corner of the seaward front of the cottage. Miss Ingestre raised her infantile forefinger, and shook her fair head with an air of rueful intelligence. "He is moving!" she whispered. "Perhaps he will come down and breathe the air. Let me go directly, for I know it would be trying for him to see me. Tell him that I called and left my"— She had risen to her small feet, and motioned for the phaeton to approach, and now she seemed to ponder deeply as she swept along towards it, accompanied by Mrs. Rothery.

"Upon my word," she exclaimed, "I don't know what to leave! One can hardly say sympathy, — condolence, — in a case like this. It would not seem delicate. But 'regards' are so cold! Why should it not be love? Tell him, Jane, that I called and left my love, will you? And good-by to yourself, and keep me informed of everything!"

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT of the "concrete little ones," the forlorn

objects of all this amateur enthusiasm?

It was no thanks to their younger guardian that, during this interval of absence on his errand of woful self-indulgence, their position was not quite so utterly defenseless as, at first sight, it appeared. When Amory Wallis had carelessly mentioned a "governess, companion, or something of that sort," he had unconsciously named a woman quite as remarkable in her way as his masterful sister, or her

engaging friend.

The last halt in Cornelia Curwen's incessant and fatal journeyings had been at San Francisco. There she had lost the ayah who had been with her ever since the birth of little Constance, and served her both as nurse and maid with singular devotion. The faithful woman died, and was buried in a flowery grave by the Pacific shore; and her exact place it had been impossible to supply. In some impatience at what he considered the immoderate sorrow of his wife and children at this loss, Mr. Curwen had advertised for maid, nurse, and governess, and the range of the applicants for the three positions had been such as only the pen of Mr. Bret Harte could compass in the telling.

Clergymen's widows and Irish scrubs, Yankee school-ma'ams and French bonnes, had alike been rejected with sickly distaste; but, sitting one day wrapped in her heaviest cashmere shawl against the winds that scour the golden city, Cornelia had heard in the anteroom of her hotel suite the voice of an applicant, the poignant familiarity of whose homely accents carried her back to her simple girl-hood in a remote New England town.

Both the children were with her. Ruth was reading "François le Champi" aloud by way of French exercise. Constance was busy with a paint-box, her favorite diversion.

Mrs. Curwen flushed brightly. "Con, tell the woman outside to come in to me directly." And to the gaunt and countrified, but tidy spinster figure that entered, said the sick lady amid her Eastern wraps, "Hannah Shippen, don't you know me?"

The applicant stopped short in the middle of the red velvet carpet and regarded her questioner with subdued amazement.

"No, mum," she replied dryly, "I can't say as I do. And yet," she added, with a shade of doubt, "seems's if I'd ought to."

"You taught me the multiplication-table," said the invalid eagerly, "when you once kept the summer school up there in that dear old red schoolhouse. And you used to come to my aunt's and fit my hideous little gowns"—

"My soul!" ejaculated Miss Shippen with a gasp; "it ain't Cornelia Mears!"

"Oh, yes, it is. I wish there were any doubt of it! Heaven knows how you came here."

"Well," returned Miss Shippen promptly, "I suppose Heaven does know as much about it as anybody. My brother David, you remember, he married Mary Jane Prentiss, and he come out here when the mines was first discovered, and, after a spell, he sent for her. She come, and they had two boys, and she died when the second was born, and he sent for me to come and keep his house. Housekeeping! My senses! Hut-keeping! I never heard of nothin' in heathen lands equal to the way those folks lived up there to the mines. Well, the amount of it is, he's married again, and I've got to look out for myself, and welcome! I saw your notice in the paper, and I thought I might do for somethin'. But I don't know as I should suit," she added, after another leisurely survey of the showy room. "You're rather slim, ain't you?"

"I'm sick unto death," said the mother with a sharp sigh, unheeding Ruth, who turned pale above her French book, and Constance, who did not notice; "and if you will come to me, Hannah Shippen, and take care of the clothes and the morals of my little girls, and make me some gruel now and then, like that aunty used to make when I was ill, away in the square house behind the poplars, - ah, how pleasant it was! What would I not give to see it again! - I will pay you anything. Only, please don't call me 'Cornelia' before Mr. Curwen and

the servants."

"I've got sense," was the laconic answer. "When shall I come?"

And the arrangement thus completed had been a beneficent one on the whole, although Hannah Shippen was "free to allow" in the privacy of her own reflections, that she never quite understood her old pupil and her new mistress. That her marriage was unhappy, she may almost be said to have known by instinct before she entered Mrs. Curwen's service; nor was there anything in the cold countenance and forbidding manners of the absorbed and strikingly inattentive husband which appealed to the astute woman's sympathy. Yet she "supposed likely" that he too might have had something to bear.

A faithful Puritan was Hannah Shippen, and a capable; exquisitely neat and essentially kind, but she was far from sentimental, and, although Cornelia leaned upon her with full reliance, and left her children, Constance especially, more and more to her direction, and liked, almost better than anything else, except her own fevered dreams, to listen to her old townswoman's racy talk about the scenes and personages of their early life, she did not confide in her. Her cherished presentiment of a supreme meeting with one of whom she had doubtful right even to dream would, she well knew, seem only less unholy to her hard-headed attendant than the ministrations of the "ritualistic" father, whom she summoned as soon as they were settled after their journey eastward, and against whose "mummeries" Hannah prayed hard that she might hold out to purse her lips in silence. She did so even to the end, and she also brought valid witnesses to Mrs. Curwen's will on the day before the last; and herself received a generous legacy; and, like Judge Ford, she owed to her own perspicacity the instantaneous recognition, as soon as he appeared, of Mr. Wallis' relation to the dead lady.

"Did y' ever see that gentleman before, Connie?" inquired Miss Shippen of her favorite, some days after Amory had departed, promising to return within the week.

"No, never once."

"Are you sure? Not a good while ago?" she urged, a little ashamed of herself, in her honest heart, but impelled by a kind of anxious curiosity.

"Quite sure! I never saw him, nor did Ruthie, but I wish he would come again, because he has such beautiful looks."

"Beautiful looks don't amount to much in a man."

"Why not, Shippie?"

"Oh, they'd ought to have something besides looks. And so'd everybody," she added, remembering to point her moral.

"Ruthie says," the child went on, not much impressed by the maxim, "that Mr. Wallis is going to be like a papa to us. He's nicer than our papa, any way."

"You should n't say that."

"Why not, Shippie?"

- "Because your father's dead."
- "And mamma is dead, too. It seems to me as if everybody would die. Oh, dear, Shippie! I think it is extremely lonesome in this house. We sha'n't stay here long, shall we?"
 - "Tain't likely."
 - "Where shall we go then?"
- "Goodness knows! To a boarding-school, most probably. I should sort of like to take you up country with me."
 - "What is 'up country'?"
- "To the town where I was raised, and where your mother lived, too, when she was a young girl. It's real pleasant there, green fields, and high hills, and orchards full of apple-trees, and a river"—
- "Like this?" asked Constance, nodding towards the Hudson.
- "Oh, no, not a big river to sail on, except to cross here and there, in still places, in little boats."
 - "That sounds nice. Go on and tell some more."
- "I've got money enough now to buy a little place. Or mebbe," continued the matter-of-fact dreamer, constructing her modest air-castle with characteristic rapidity, "if I had you two to board, I could take the Mears house, which they say has stood empty ever since the old lady died. You'd like that, would n't you? Just where your own mother used to live when she was a little girl. But law," said Miss Shippen, recovering from her visionary lapse, "'t would n't never be allowed.

That moonshiny young man 'll have very different notions for you. I sort o' think, though, the old judge would be willing you should go with me."

"There!" interrupted Connie, "Judge Ford has beautiful looks too. Don't you think he 'amounts

to much '?"

"What a child you are! There ain't any kind o' comparison between the men. The judge is a very clever, sensible old gentleman, and I suppose that he forgets more, as folks say, every year, than the other ever knew. But his hair is as white as lamb's wool. I should n't ha' thought you 'd ha' minded about his looks."

"Well, I did. And his hair is lovely, if it is white. I don't know if Ruthie thinks so, but I do."

"Where is Ruth?"

"Oh, Shippie, I don't know! I suppose she's crying somewhere. I'm very sorry, too; but I can't cry all day long, and I'm so lonely! Can't you tell me something to do?"

"Don't you want to hem one o' them things of yours for me? 'T would sort o' occupy your

mind."

For Miss Shippen, all the while she talked, was at work with blinding rapidity on a pile of pocket handkerchiefs with deep black borders. When the mother of the little girls had so quickly followed her husband, the imperative propriety of a change in their dress had at once been impressed on all the feminine minds of the household. But Hannah, in her rural thrift and simplicity, having said something about "makin' mournin'," she had been scornfully corrected by the most knowing of the maids, and instructed how to send to a city warehouse an unlimited order for black wardrobes, a part of the unlimited results of which were now before her.

The child lifted a corner of the sheer fabric, and made the edges of the black stripe meet around her plump finger. "I'll try," she said, "but I don't like it. It pricks my fingers so."

She had managed, however, to set some six laborious stitches, when a piercing young voice cried to her, "Oh, my darling, how can you touch those things? Put them right down, Connie dear; and come with me!"

It was Ruth, who stood in the doorway, looking tall and thin and almost womanly in her fresh mourning. Amory Wallis might well have thought her like her mother if he had seen her now. The intense black eyes, the pale oval face, the scarlet lips were the same, and the expression, for the moment, so sorrowfully mature. "Come out of doors with me, Connie dear," she repeated. "Shippie, why do you look so stern? May n't Connie come?"

"I've no objection," answered Miss Shippen.
"Not if you'll stay with her and be good to her.
Your sister's lonesome, Ruth; and who's she got to keep her company, if you don't?"

The elder girl's look turned very haughty as

she said, "What do you mean, Hannah, by telling me to be good to my Constance? She is my own. Don't stay, darling!" and she brushed the bit of linen off the child's lap, and drew her away. But on the landing of the big staircase she stopped, and threw her arms around the little one passionately. "You did not think I ran away from you, did you, sweeting? It was only because I was so sad."

"I know that. It's what I said to Shippie. But, sister, this house is very horrid."

"The garden is a little better, don't you think?" said Ruth languidly and meekly, her momentary fire all faded. "We'll go there."

The intention of the garden had been grand, in the stiff, box-bordered style of twenty years before that date. Little care having been given it for some years, it was now, however, a gaudy wilderness. The box was rampant, and weeds had invaded the long, graveled walks. The rosebushes ran riot, many weeks out of bloom, but flaunting scarlet seed-vessels. The huge althaeas and tulip-trees were in full flower, and were dropping their gay petals on the elaborate garden-seats. Crowds of splendid hollyhocks pushed far beyond the limit first assigned them; peaches were ripening against the red brick walls, surmounted by ornamental stone copings; the glass of the extensive graperies was blazing in the strong sunshine. The children stayed their steps for a moment in the shade of a trellised archway, covered with a dense growth of flowering honeysuckle, where the rich

and spicy odor of the blossoms was almost over-powering.

- "It is too sweet," Ruth said, and strayed onward with a restless look towards another bower at no great distance, dazzling with the orange trumpets of the bignonia. This was an octagonal structure, with a gilded pineapple atop, and a round window looking out upon the stately river. Before this window the two sat down and involuntarily locked their small right hands together. It was the younger who began to talk.
- "Why didn't you want me to touch the black handkerchiefs, Ruthie?"
- "Because they were black, and they were for mamma."
 - "Not for papa at all?"
- "Oh, yes, certainly, for him, too. But I could not bear you to work on them."
- "I did n't work much. But we wear the black things, Ruthie."
- "That is very different. It is not like learning to sew on them," Ruth answered dreamily. Her dark eyes were fixed on the opposite shore of the river.

Constance did not like the far-away look. She shook her sister's hand impatiently, still holding it.

"I want to talk to you, Ruth," she said, "else what's the good of my having you? Did n't you say that Mr. Wallis was the one to take care of us?"

[&]quot;Yes, indeed, he is."

"What made him the one?"

Ruth hesitated a moment, not quite sure that she had the right to tell, for a sense of something secret about the beautiful gentleman was strong upon her, and was one of the puzzles of those strange days. "Mamma asked him in a letter," she admitted at last. "She said he was her best and oldest friend, — that is, not better perhaps, of course, than poor papa, but older, certainly."

"Oh, no, Ruthie! Mr. Wallis is n't old at all. He's not much bigger than the boys at West Point. I think he would be good to play with, if it were right to play. But it's like Sunday every day, is it not? Shippie said he was a moonshiny

young man."

"She had no right," said Ruth, coloring. "I wonder at Shippen."

"She does n't appear to like Mr. Wallis," the other went on. "She said she wished we could live with her, away off in the house where mamma used to live when she was small. She thought the nice old judge would like that. Should you like it, Ruthie?"

"I should like to see every place where mamma has lived. Only think of all those that we know, Connie, all about the world, and over the seas! And now both our parents are gone to some other world, and we are in this. Where can that other world be? Oh, it's the strangeness of it!" she said a little wildly; "the strangeness of it! Some days I am so sorry I can't think about it, and some

other days I think about it so much that I can't seem to be sorry," and the fragile child knitted her brows and struggled boldly, in silence, for a moment with the "final inexplicability," then added, with a sigh, expressive almost of exhaustion, "All I know is that mamma wanted us to belong to Mr. Wallis, and do as he said."

But Constance had become speculative in her turn. "Do you suppose," she said, "that mamma can see us now? Shippie seemed to think so one day, when I had done something she did n't like."

Ruth shook her head, but did not answer.

"And do you suppose that papa and mamma can talk together, just as we do? Of course they can both talk to God, but can they talk to each other?"

"Oh, I don't know, Con, dear! I fancy that Father Emmons could tell."

"I'll not ask him, though. I don't like him one mite, and Shippie does n't."

"That must be very wrong, for mamma liked him, and he made her happier."

A dull silence fell upon them then, and lasted for a long time. They sat with their fine heads framed in the circle of rich foliage, and relieved against the dark interior of the arbor, which was built upon the lower garden-wall. At the distance of a yard or two, a door in this wall communicated with a distinct though somewhat overgrown path, which meandered pleasantly down between the scattered trees and shrubbery of the shore to the nearest steamboat landing.

All at once there was a rustle among the shrubs, a sound of quick footsteps, and a loud, masculine voice cried exultantly: "By George, it's like one of what's-his-name's lunettes! Sit still there, you two!"

The natural effect of this was to startle both faces out of their repose, and Ruth uttered a cry of alarm.

"Now you've scared 'em," said another voice, and a six-foot lad, with a shambling gait, and a simple, freekled face, rolled into view, and began waving his preposterously large hands towards the sisters, in what was plainly intended for a soothing and deprecatory manner. "There, there! Don't ye mind, only don't ye move! 'T won't hurt! He jest wants to take ye."

Constance leaped off the seat of the summer-house with wide, excited eyes.

"Get out of the way, you simpleton!" roared the black-bearded owner of the first voice. "And hold these things!" he added peremptorily, dragging into view a photographic camera and case of negatives. "And you, young ladies," striding towards the garden-wall, and making a careless movement towards his soft, slouched hat, as he met Ruth's composed and steadfast gaze, "please to remain as you were before. I'm taking photographs of river scenery, and I want a picture of you, that's all. Get up again, little one."

[&]quot;Shall I, Ruth?"

[&]quot;I don't really like it," was the answer.

"That's of no consequence whatever," said the artist brusquely. "You keep on looking precisely as you do now, my pretty maid, sad, you know, and scornful; and let the other look as she will. That's it!" as Constance showed once more at the window a face full of innocent wonderment. "Now, for the Lord's sake, keep still! It'll soon be over," and he snatched the instruments from the hands of his attendant, and began adjusting them with extreme rapidity.

Ruth essayed a last protest. "I do not like it,"

she said, half rising.

"Sit down!" cried the photographer, with a tone like the blast of a trumpet, "or I'll put you under psychological influence in a twinkling!" and as Ruth sank back appalled, and Constance breathed in an awestruck whisper, "What's that?" the arrangements were completed, and, in another

moment, the deed was done.

"Thanks," nodded the operator carelessly. Then when he had withdrawn his negative, and held it up for examination carefully between the palms of his hands, he nodded again, more emphatically. "Greatly obliged, young ladies. It's a very pretty picture, stunning even. Hey!" as a steamboat whistle sounded close at hand. "There's the boat, and she's stopping here. Gather up these traps, you fellow! We must take her. Adieu, my dears!" And he waved his soft hat with one hand, while, with the other, he seized the negative-case, and executed, along with his abject follower, a somewhat headlong retreat down the leafy way.

The color in Ruth's cheeks was still deepening. "We'd better not stay here any longer," she said.

But the more inquisitive Constance lingered at the round window. "Ruth," she whispered, "they 're coming back. Oh, no," after an instant, "it's not they. It's our Mr. Wallis."

"Then," said Ruth joyfully, "I'll undo the garden door;" and she hastened forward, and, lifting the heavy fastening in her slim hands, she threw the wooden gate wide open.

Amory, coming up the river-bank, and wondering how he might find his way around to the front of the mansion which he deeply dreaded to enter, saw the two little black-robed figures rise suddenly before him, and stretched out both hands to them impulsively. The children ran and seized his arms, and he stooped and kissed the forehead of each, not without an inward shock and thrill.

- "My little girls come to meet me," he said.

 "Have they been well since I left them?"
 - "Quite well."
- "But lonely and dull," added the more fluent Constance. "We are so very glad you are come back. Did you meet the men who took our pictures?"
- "Who did what? Forgive me, sweet! I find I do not even know your name, though I remember well that this is Ruth."
- "I am Constance. They took our photographs with their machine."
 - "We were at the summer-house window," ex-

plained Ruth, with her peculiarly rich and beautiful blush, "and a man came and told us to keep still. Was it wrong? I did not quite know."

"Not wrong in you," said Amory quickly. "And I can't say that I blame the man," he was on the point of adding, but paused under the first drawing of a wholly new restraint. "But if you are to be my girls, I think I'll say henceforth who shall take your pictures, and when."

"That will be best," said Ruth sedately. "Will you come into the house?"

"Only tell us first," cried her sister, not quite resisting the impulse to caper, "what we shall call you. For if we belong to each other, it ought not to be 'Mister.'"

"No, indeed!" He anticipated Ruth, who would have closed the garden gate behind them, and then turned and leaned against the wall, fixing and fascinating the two alike, by a long, wistful look out of his violet eyes,—a look at once puzzled, pensive, and kindly. They both watched him with lifted faces, and began to feel that they already loved him well.

"You could n't call me uncle?" he said doubtfully. "I'm not much like an uncle," with a whimsical smile.

"Oh, no! At least we never had one, but they are old, are n't they? I told sister," declared Constance, suddenly throwing off all reserve, "that you were like the boys at West Point."

It was Amory's turn to color slightly. "Too

much so, I'm afraid," and he shook his blonde hair. "Ah, well; what if you were to call me Guardian?"

"If you please," Ruth answered; and, after a pause of consideration, Constance too assented. She kept fast hold of his left hand, as they went up, through the garden, to the broad veranda at the back of the house, while Ruth walked silently on the other side. The last of the funeral flowers were yellowing in a silver dish upon the hall table. Amory shrank from them involuntarily, and Ruth said, "I will tell some one to take them away."

But Constance ran gayly up the great staircase, and called at the door of Hannah Shippen's room, "Shippie, Guardian's come!"

CHAPTER V.

THE understanding thus lightly established between Amory Wallis and his wards grew rapidly He was one who, for his life, could do nothing ungracefully, who could instantaneously adapt his outward bearing to the most unlookedfor circumstances with a gentle and supple ease. Whether or no the paralyzed purpose which had transformed a soul teeming with fruitful promise into a flowery desert — as a fire-scathed field may flaunt with brilliant bloom—might be reanimated and toned to efficient action; whether or no the diffused tenderness which had enveloped his invalid being in a haze of sad romance might be condensed again into a clear-running and refreshing stream, - these were questions which began to present themselves to the guardian's own mind, under the more or less metaphorical forms which were the habit of the poet's thought. He was actually so inexperienced that he did not even know, until politely and dryly informed by Judge Ford, that his guardianship must be confirmed by the courts before he could begin to exercise its functions.

"And allow me to suggest that these children are themselves old enough to express a preference which would be respectfully regarded."

The judge was a large man, with a leonine head, deep-set eyes, and clear, incisive utterance. Amory was elegantly lounging about the musty library, idly reading the titles of its rather second-rate volumes, while his interlocutor sat square and upright before the writing-table.

"Oh," said Amory frankly, pausing with a small volume of Byron in his hand, where he was meaning to look for a quotation which had haunted him that day. "There won't be any difficulty about that. I think the girls are fond of me already."

"'Likes little girls, and big girls too,' like the immortal A. Ward," reflected the judge rather grimly; but it was the least of his intent to joke audibly on the present occasion. He regarded the insouciant subject before him steadfastly for a few moments, from under the "pent-house" of his grizzled eyebrows. Then he abruptly threw off the polished formality of his usual manner and adopted a bluntness which he kept in reserve for special occasions.

"Young man," he said, "I don't know exactly how old you are"—

"Does it matter?" inquired Amory, conscientiously obeying a presentiment of business, and quickly replacing Byron in his row. "I mean, am I required to furnish that fact to any sort of document? It's no particular comfort to me to remember the number of my years. I'm over twentyone," he added, with an engaging smile.

"I must beg of you to give me your serious at-

tention. You were not, I believe, aware of the late Mrs. Curwen's intention to make you her trustee?"

"Certainly not."

"She was a very remarkable woman."

"Need we discuss her?"

"Yes," said the judge sharply. "She has done the sort of thing which renders discussion inevitable. I say she was a remarkable woman because she has done this strange thing in a perfectly sound, careful, and, I believe, impregnable manner. Do you follow me?"

"Pray give me credit for average intelligence!"

"When, therefore, her will has been admitted to probate, provided it be not disputed"—

"Is it likely to be disputed?"

"Hardly; and I may say that it cannot be done successfully. When you have received your appointment from the court, a large amount of invested property, a controlling share of a very complex business, a lawsuit or two, and, in short, the whole present and future interests of these two solitary children pass virtually into your hands."

"And into yours," Amory said earnestly. "Believe me, it has been the greatest possible comfort to me to know that my deplorable inexperience of affairs would be supplemented by your own great knowledge and ripe wisdom."

"My powers are by no means as clearly defined as yours," returned the judge, unpropitiated. "Still, I suppose I could prevent your doing anything very mad." "I hope the powers above would prevent that; but I'd much rather, for my own part, that they had your professional assistance. The fact is, I've led a languid, desultory kind of life"—

"That, begging your pardon, is evident enough."

- "But," continued Amory with invincible amiability, "I have always supposed that I had a certain sort of cleverness; and I do honestly mean to concentrate it on the comprehension of this business. As for the personal care and custody of Mrs. Curwen's daughters," flushing with the effort it cost him to pronounce her name, "no earthly consideration would induce me to surrender that. Just as soon as the affairs of this household can be wound up, and the formalities of which you speak dispatched, I shall take them home with me."
- "You have a home, then? It is not the invariable rule with young gentlemen."
- "I have a home, and my sister is my very sensible and accomplished housekeeper; and that home will be made large enough to receive my wards at any cost to her or me."
- "'Cost'? What do you mean by cost? Good heavens, man! One would think you did not know that, under any circumstances, you get a large addition to your own income!"
- "On my honor, it never occurred to me," was the careless reply.
- "Well," said the judge testily, "I know nothing of your circumstances. Perhaps your income is already so princely that a few thousands more or less would make no appreciable difference."

"Pooh!" said Amory. "I have the income of a hundred thousand dollars or so, but hang that sort of comfortable pittance! I have sometimes thought that if it had been more, or if it had been nothing, I should have been more likely to come to some definite good."

"I think it highly probable that it might better have been nothing," — Judge Ford's tones became more cordial than they had before been; "but we who have had our bread to get are, perhaps, too prone to claim it for an honorable distinction."

"But just now," pursued Amory, smiling, and following up his advantage with no little tact, "I should be almost as great an innocent as you take me for, if I did not perceive that more money will make my arrangements easier."

The old lawyer softened a little farther. "You 'll find, my friend," he warmly averred, "that, in the long run, the law generally does make arrangements easier. The gospel would stand but a poor chance without it."

From "young man" to "my friend" was a measurable distance on the gamut of Judge Ford's esteem. These dissimilar associates had a somewhat better understanding at the close of the above conversation than at its beginning.

It was so in their subsequent discussions, which were necessarily many. Just as the elder man thought he had arrived at a point of high and just exasperation with the incompetence and indifference, not to say levity, of the younger, the latter

would surprise him by some luminous comment or acute suggestion, which seemed to render it certain that he had not been too presumptuous when he had laid a deferential claim to a "certain sort of cleverness," while of his sensitive honor and even romantic disinterestedness there could be no reasonable doubt. Still it was irksome to a man of Judge Ford's years and experience either perpetually to readjust his opinion, or to make room in his already extensive classification of his fellow-beings for a unique specimen; and the singularity of the circumstances presently drew him into rather confidential relations with the only other person about the place in whom he discerned something akin to his own practical shrewdness. It is hardly necessary to say that that person was Hannah Shippen.

The judge followed a morning telegram of his own up from the city on a superb afternoon in September. August fogs were exorcised; the wind blew from two points north of west; the enchantment of the river scenery was enhanced by splendid sunshine. The old lawyer approved the weather, and the tide of almost youthful vigor which it set running in his own veins, but he felt his unusual exhilaration of spirits to be chiefly due to the fact that one of the lawsuits had taken an unexpected turn. The adversaries of the Curwen heirs had made an adroit move, which was to be met and circumvented by another yet more adroit. "And it can be done, by Jove! And I'll pin Prince Feather-Brain down, and hold him till he sees it," was the good man's doughty resolution.

He walked slowly—it would be outrageous to say waddled—up the shady path which Amory had mounted a fortnight before, and had given the door in the garden-wall a hard shake before he remembered that he had himself peremptorily ordered it to be kept locked, on the occasion of his last visit. "All right! Glad they mind," and he puffed cheerfully round to the front of the mansion. It was very still there; broad sunshine on the lawn, where the third grass-crop was already seeded; the doors and window-blinds all scrupulously closed. The maid who answered his ring and inquiry for Mr. Wallis assured him that Mr. Wallis and the young ladies had been gone all day.

"Then I'll see Miss Shippen," he said, thrusting his bag into the girl's hand with no little fierceness of physiognomy, and marching into the long, gilded drawing-room, where he snorted at the sunless atmosphere, and proceeded, first of all, to push away the draperies, pull up the blinds, and throw open the leaves of three long, French windows. Before he had accomplished this illumination of the room, Miss Shippen stood before him.

"How d' ye do, ma'am? Why do you keep it like a cellar here? Where's that young man? Did n't you get my telegram?"

"Take a seat, Judge," said Miss Shippen calmly. "The dispatch came, but they was gone first. Ez fur the curtains," she added, surveying the results of the visitor's reform movement, "the way you've got'em now is the way they've been, mostly, since

my young gentleman come back. He said he could n't bear the aspect of a house o' mournin'. Said it would crush the sperits o' the girls, and so on. So everything was flung wide, and of course the natural consequences was—flies. Now, if there's anythin' I hate, it's flies; but what can you expect at this season o' the year? I've been fightin' 'em high and low the best way I could, and to-day when they all went off so early, says I, 'I'll try pitch darkness and see how that'll work.' Oh, I hate 'em like sin!"

- "Very good, but you did n't mention Mr. Wallis's whereabouts."
- "Sure enough! Why, he's gone with the children to spend a day up river."
 - "How up river? On the steamer?"
- "Well, no. In a boat he found at the boathouse down here and tinkered up. The girls was wild to go, 'specially Connie, and how could I hinder 'em?"
- "What does he know about boating? It leaked, of course."
- "Well," said Hannah dispassionately, "to do him justice, he did seem to know about a boat. Keeps one, he says, down there to his house on the shore."

The judge considered a moment, then pulled out his antique watch. "Half past four, and you'll give us dinner at six. They'll be at home by that time if they ever come, I suppose. Not to waste the day entirely,—sit down, Miss Shippen, and

give me your attention. I 've been wanting a little talk with you, and there may never be a better opportunity."

Primly and in silence Hannah arranged herself on the most upright of the blue-and-gold damask parlor chairs, and her examination began on this wise.

"What do you know about Mr. Wallis?"

"I know just what I see, Judge, and what I hear him say: neither more nor less."

"Had you never seen him before the night of Mrs. Curwen's death?"

"No, sir! nor heard of him till I wrote the telegraph"—

"The —?"

"The dispatch," said Hannah, obstinately balking at the outlandishness of telegram. "She made me write one that would fetch him, in one of her quiet spells the day before the last. Poor creetur! She did suffer. Her will had been witnessed the day before. She knew I could n't do it because she'd left me somethin'. Thought of every single thing. She said this man I was sendin' for was goin' to be the girls' guardeen. I expected, of course, to see an elderly pusson. You may guess what a turn it give me when this one bolted into the room and kissed her, like mad"—

The judge bowed gravely.

"Well, it wa'n't no time for words. He was in dreadful distress o' mind. Nobody could doubt that. That sort o' priest she had round could n't get in another word edgeways. Ten minutes after he come, 't was all over. I'd never seen his face before, as I told you, but I saw it pretty soon again; and where do you suppose?" Hannah paused impressively, and then added with solemn emphasis, "in a locket on her lifeless breast.

"I was terribly put to it," she went on, "to know what to do with the miniatur'. Somehow I hated to have the children see it, especially Ruth, — she 's so cute. Finally, I don't know but 't was a sin, — nice little gold locket and chain! but I left it there, and 't was buried with her."

"You did quite right. It is evidently as I supposed, Miss Shippen, and as I have no doubt you supposed also, Mr. Wallis was the object of an early attachment."

"Early 'n' late, I guess, an' all along!"

"A remarkable woman," mused the judge, "and remarkably helped to the attainment of her purpose. Well, she has her will now, and let us hope that she knows and has pleasure in it. Tell me now, if you can, exactly how Mr. Wallis impresses you, after a fortnight's acquaintance."

Hannah rubbed her nose in silence for a few seconds, before she looked up and answered, the firm muscles about her mouth relaxing into a half apologetic smile. "Well, now, do you know, I kind o' think well of him, after all?"

"Glad to hear it! How so?"

"He ain't got," said Miss Shippen, hastily, "no experience, nor no weight, nor no dignity, to speak

of; but he's got a mighty tender heart, — too tender fur's I know. When he first come, I thought he was an arrant coxcomb. 'No, I thank you,' to all the food! and such a table as that wasteful cook will set, too, just 'cause she wants the things herself! I put my foot down about the children. But I do think now, he felt too bad to eat. And still, you know, he never moped before the children. Said they'd ought to be cheered up, and told 'em stories by the yard; and took 'em out o' doors; and cleared up the summer-houses; and got out that boat. That was the first thing that struck me as sort o' good an' unselfish in him. I'd been really worried about Ruth before he come. She's awful high-strung, just like her mother, and, do what I would, she'd steal off into that room, you know, and lay right down on the carpet where the bed used to be, - for of course I had it taken down, - and there she'd lay, with her great black eyes staring wide open. I did n't know but she 'd go crazy. 'T was awful for the little one, who 's a deal the most takin' child of the two. What to do I did n't know. But as soon as my gentleman come, things, as I say, begun to mend. I'll tell you what 't is," she added, after a momentary pause, "he'll love 'em: and love," concluded Miss Shippen, with a reminiscence of that pulpit logic which triumphs unanswerably in a Scripture text, relevant or other, "love is the fulfillin' o' the law."

[&]quot;So, if I furnish law, he'll supply love, eh?

Well, that may be a fair enough division of their interests. They are uncommonly clever, are they not?"

"Nothin' extraordinary in that way. Constance is the easiest managed of the two, but even she is quick as a flash"—

"No, no! I mean quick of apprehension; bright in their studies."

"Oh, you mean smart! Yes, indeed! Ruth reads her French, and writes her poetry and plays the piano; and Connie draws. I'd just like you to see the things she draws! She had a master in Frisco; and was to have had another here, if the heavens had n't fallen, as I may say."

"And now these girls will be brought up in Boston! O Lord!"

Somewhat startled, but disdaining to betray such a sentiment, Miss Shippen merely remarked, "I never was there to stop."

"It's a famous city," said the judge, meditatively. "A very famous city. But if I had my way, I'd sooner turn the girls out to pasture in your native town."

"But," argued Hannah, in an ellipsis perfectly intelligible to Judge Ford, "you see, you ain't, nor I neither. I could easy enough have set my heart on 'em; but what a fool I should 'a been! And Mr. Wallis, as I tell you, has got heart enough, if that was all. I've a notion, though, that he 's a good deal under the thumb of that sister of his, and that she 's one of your real, masterful, high-toned, strenuous women."

The judge shook his head in silence.

"But then," pursued the other, dispassionately, "there's their Heavenly Father."

"You're a religious woman, then, Miss Shippen?"

"I ain't a professor, if that's what you mean; but I always felt that I obtained a hope, up there to the mines. 'T was such an awful wicked place I could n't do otherwise." Hannah spoke as she might of the purchase of a pistol.

"Well, then, perhaps you will be able to interest the Powers above on behalf of the little Curwens. Hark! Don't I hear them now?"

Through the widespread windows the west wind brought the faint notes of a trio of laughter from far down the neglected garden. Each of the three voices was distinguishable. "They're all children together," said Hannah, with an air of rather contemptuous indulgence.

At all events the children, over whose heads such a storm of fate had but lately broken, had had one cloudless play-day; a day, the lightest of whose fair features, the flash of its waves, the twinkle of its foliage, above all, the keen scent of its wild grapes just ripening, would remain forever in the memory of the little girls, bright and permanent like jewels or like stars. Their elder playmate would not remember the day so well, but he had perhaps enjoyed it even more keenly while it was passing. For he had fully come to the appreciation of the *present*. Sad attainment! implying how

many years, how much of anguish and disappointment! and yet one of nature's gentlest and most sufficient compensations for unreturning days.

They had pulled up the bright river at ten in the morning, and presently turned aside into one of its clear tributaries, where Amory taught his wards how to hold an oar. Afterwards, when they rested from their labors awhile in a shady and quiet spot, he had ordered them to sing, gravely informing them that there never yet was a proper boating party without music by the crew. The request had revealed a rather primitive stage of vocal culture in young ladies as well brought forward in some of the arts and sciences as they had been by the eager, maternal ambition of poor Cornelia. It was the day of the so-called negro melodies: not the real, wild, untaught plantation strain never heard in the North until some years later, but the spurious and sentimental sort, pleasant enough in melody, too, sometimes, which originated - who knows where? and expressed the average sympathies of the free-state theorist with the unknown slave, before that sympathy was suddenly called to become a sacrifice.

Thus the children sang together "Dearest May," and "The Swanee River," and "My Old Kentucky Home," and others of that school. They had learned the airs quite by rote, but carried two parts as if instinctively, and their untrained voices were exceedingly sweet, especially Ruth's soprano.

"Don't you know any other kind of songs?" de-

manded Amory, when he had applauded, and encored, and criticised a little, and wholly won their musical confidence.

"O Ruthie," cried Constance, "sing him the one the lady used to sing in the parlor next ours at the last hotel!" and Amory bent forward and said, "Please to favor me," as he might have done to a society belle.

So, with high color and shining eyes, Ruth began: —

"'When stars are in the quiet skies, Then most I pine for thee,'"—

Amory turned a little pale. The execution of that simple song had once been a chef d'œuvre of his own, and it had been her favorite; that and

"I arise from dreams of thee."

His vivid, sympathetic imagination showed him Cornelia on her couch with fixed and piercing eyes, her ear teased and her heart sickened by those familiar strains, which now her orphan child naïvely rehearsed to him. And whence, oh whence, he asked himself, with a great rush of pitiful yearning which fairly brought the too facile tears into his eyes, came the strange presentiment of passion in those ingenuous tones? He wanted to throw his arms around the little maid, and ward her forever, sadly and fiercely, from the merciless future hurrying on to meet her. He even forgot for a moment that there were two sisters.

Amory only said "Thank you!" when the song

was done, but the child was content. She knew well enough that she had moved him.

He took up the oars again, and they resumed their shining way. People who saw them from the shore looked long after them, and thought they made a singular and charming group.

They anchored for lunch in a beauteous cove, where a deep bend in the river gave it almost the aspect of an inland lake. They climbed the shaded bank by a narrow pathway, splendidly fringed with feathers of fern and golden-rod, and the firetipped arrows of the cardinal-flower. They sat down upon a cloth of golden-rod for their rural The sunshine sifted rarely through the feast. rustling boughs above them; blue jays screamed in the woods at their rear, bringing tropical parrots to the minds of the experienced little wanderers; and, now and then, the soft throbbing whirr of a partridge was audible from the deeper shades. The spirituous wild-grape scent was stronger than ever in the delicious air.

Their romantic meal concluded, they proceeded to the formal entertainment of the day. First of all, Amory arranged seats for the sisters, with assiduous care, out of wraps and rugs brought with them in the boat. He made sure that the flickering sunlight would not tease their eyes. He presented to each of them, with a courtly bow, a huge fern-frond with which to wave away the insects. Then he flung himself upon the turf, braced his back against the columnar trunk of a tall, cedar-

like pine, drew from his coat-pocket the proper alphabet of poetry, "The Lady of the Lake," and began to read aloud:—

"' 'Harp of the North, that mouldering long hast hung,' "

thy enchantment is made perennial for all innocent souls! Surely the warm-hearted wizard who re-tuned thee seventy years ago, would have prized more than all his other many-sided fame, had he foreknown it, this immortality in the first thrilling joys of the wakening intellect, the perpetual delight of soulful children in his lay!

And never were children more exquisitely tempered for the spell than these two. They fled with the stag, and followed with the huntsman; they plied the oar with the woodland fairy, the smile and light jest with the unconscious coquette; they dreamed on the heather couch with the high-born stranger under the rudely trophied walls. They soon forgot the fair present. The golden-rod transformed itself into broom; they breathed the air of the more storied if not older Highlands; the sweet hours of the autumn afternoon slipped by unheeded. They fell upon their guardian without reverence or reserve, and mutinously clamored for more, when Amory artfully closed the book, after delivering "Hail to the Chief," in his most clarion-like tones, and gave the order to embark. But the master of the situation was inexorable, for his own sake almost as much as theirs, for he who has learned to relish a simple pleasure must needs have learned

to sip it; and so they returned to the presence of the queerly assorted committee which had been sitting on their prospects, as we have seen.

It was impossible not to approve the color of the girls when they came in; but Hannah, with the grievous instinct implanted by her Puritan ancestry and training, was a little scandalized by their positive hilarity, and even the judge exhibited a certain fierceness in his manner of putting Amory through a somewhat appalling course of legal and business details in the evening.

The "young man" sat opposite to his energetic tutor, sideways to the document-strewn table, his chiseled chin supported upon his hand. He paid irreproachable attention, but looked so confoundedly dreamy and good natured as rather to increase the good lawyer's exasperation at the fact that, with so slight a seeming effort, he would understand.

CHAPTER VI.

Miss Ingestre was receiving a caller in a small private parlor at Parker's. It was the first week in December: the first snow of an average season was meandering in large flakes down a dun-colored sky. The first slush of the season mantled the streets of the Pilgrim City. The hard-coal fire in the open grate did its best; but it is needless to say that neither within nor without was the prospect positively enlivening. More and more deeply did the plump Estelle involve herself in a certain beloved Parisian wrap of blue satin lined with swan's-down, and retired on account of growing infirmities from duty at the opera, while her tiny feet, encased in quilted slippers, also of the inevitable tint, crept further and further out upon the low fender.

The visitor was one of those through whom, in the earlier days of her unfettered heiress-hood, Miss Ingestre had garnered what she described as "experience." She had once, in fact, been engaged to marry this man, but had wrecked his golden prospects one fine day because she fancied that she found him deficient in "soul." He had now for an indefinite number of years, been the pastor of a wealthy congregation and the husband of

an invalid wife; and it seemed fair to conclude that he might have repaired his early lack of sensibility. At all events, Estelle felt very kindly towards him, and always advised him as soon as she was established for any time in the city of his ministrations, while he was sure to respond to her summons on the first stormy morning like the present when they would not be very liable to interruption. Estelle's name figured impressively on most of Dr. Forney's pet subscription lists, and they had certainly arrived at accord during their years of separation on many matters, philosophical and sentimental, secular and spiritual. Estelle, in particular, always felt in a manner elevated by these interviews when they were over, and inclined to rank herself only a little lower than Madame Récamier in her ability to retain as friends those whom she had rejected as lovers.

"I am rejoiced, for one," said Dr. Forney, rubbing his hands and beaming a good deal upon his rosy hostess through the gold-rimmed spectacles which had latterly replaced the *pince-nez* of his rationalistic youth, — "gratified beyond measure, and so will poor Mariana be" (Mariana was his wife), "that you really think of making your home among us this winter. But how do you expect to endure our savage weather? Are you not intimidated by the onslaught of to-day?"

"I don't allow myself to be so," replied the lady, looking sternly intrepid amid her swan's-down. "I daresay nobody born outside the tropics

ever suffered from cold as I do; and certainly, your sour Boston climate does n't improve by time. But I can bear it now, for I have a motive. A woman," — Estelle was wont, upon these occasions, rather to insist upon herself as a woman and a type, — "A woman, Dr. Forney, can bear anything with a sufficient motive."

"And I do not need to be told, my friend," said the doctor, with some effusion, "that the motive is a benevolent one. I believe you have no others. But is it safe? The old weakness here?" and he touched his linen front inquiringly between the first and second of his decent onyx studs.

For one of Estelle's "experiences" had once been thought to have settled on her lungs, and, though nature and medical treatment had prevailed, Estelle had long been reluctant to relinquish the distinction of that supposed phthisis. Nothing, perhaps, could have shown her present zeal and disinterestedness more plainly than the jocund tone in which she replied,—

"Oh, I have surmounted that, I believe, as I have a good many other things. The gods found that they did not love me as well as they had fancied. So here I am — deeply, oh, so deeply interested in two such enchanting children!"

The doctor's face fell a little. It would be difficult to say what sort of a shadowy hope he still associated with Miss Ingestre's fortune. Perhaps it had reference merely to public charities. Still he did not quite like to see her going into raptures

over anybody's children. He said to himself that it was not so much of a slander after all to call her "flighty," and he said aloud:—

"Some young relatives, perhaps."

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort! In fact I have no particular responsibility about them; but they have completely won my heart by their interesting traits, and the singularity of their position. Did you ever know Mrs. Robert Curwen — née Mears?"

"Ah!" said the doctor, and he fully meant to say it blandly. "It is Mr. Amory Wallis's wards whom you are befriending. I have heard something of that strange story. But will his sister, Mrs. Rothery, — I do not know her much personally; she is not, as you know, one of my flock"—

"My dear doctor, she is not of any flock! She

is quite past a shepherd."

"Exactly! One of the extremely advanced. But will she, who has kept so very effectually the keeper of these children, — Quis custodiet, etc.?—will she brook any interference with her plans, any gentler, more refining, and, so to speak, familiarizing influence?" And the gold-bowed glasses became expressive.

"Thank you," replied Estelle, dropping her veined lids. "Something of that sort I hope to exert. In many ways, I admire Jane Rothery's views and coincide with them. We are very intimate,—next-door neighbors all summer, you know,—and I have learned to make allowance for her brusquerie; and she, to understand in me the ear-

nestness which underlies a perhaps too soft and simple exterior. We both,"—and the blonde hugged herself in her swan's-down wrapper with almost spasmodic fervor,—"we both want the woman of the future defended by vigorous training from the mistakes and anguish and futility of the past. But dear Jane is such a Spartan! Merciless, I call her, in some ways. It was all very well in Amory's case, who was actually a man when she took him in hand, but these orphan girls! I assure you, doctor, that I felt somehow called of Heaven to hover near them, and temper, by a little sympathy and indulgence, good Jane Rothery's well-meant severity."

Dr. Forney bowed, and murmured something about the exceeding goodness of her heart. He thought to himself that, of all the romantic purposes which he had ever known this impressionable lady to embrace with fervor, the present was the most far-fetched and quixotic. To "hover over" the governess of the guardian of two children who were absolutely nothing to her, in order to modify the scheme of education which the governess was expected to coerce the guardian into imposing upon the girls, — the notion seemed so broadly absurd, and the doctor was so irritated by Estelle's entire preoccupation with it, and so impatient to represent it to some one else in all its absurdity, that he made his call much briefer than usual, and actually hurried home to tell his wife about it.

"Happening to be in that quarter of the town

this morning, I thought I would obey our friend Miss Ingestre's summons,"—this was the way he prefaced his tale; and the pale, gentle, keen-eyed lady to whom he told it listened with a faint smile, and said quietly, when he had done:—

"For my part, I am very glad she feels disposed to 'hover;' and I have no doubt those girls will have reason to bless her for it. Besides, she is a very entertaining person, and I shall quite enjoy myself seeing her now and then this winter."

It took longer than had been anticipated to wind up the needful business in Herkimer County; and on that dreary day of the first snow-storm, Amory's new household was not yet fully established in the plain but irreproachable house on the quietest street of the Hill, which Mrs. Rothery had finally selected for him.

Jane had tried hard to make Estelle take the model apartment off their hands; but this the maiden lady had resisted with an airy, sprightly obstinacy quite peculiar to her.

"It is a great deal too convenient ever to be made sufficiently sumptuous," said Miss Ingestre, after trotting once round the rooms, with an imposing length of velvet train behind her; "and I consider that so entirely a new way of saying that, if you have the luxuries of life you can dispense with its necessaries, that 't is almost as good as saying a new thing." Ultimately she, too, went, as she had always meant to go, to a point slightly more fashionable than Butternut Street, but not too remote from it, and set up house-keeping.

But now Ruth and Constance were just being inducted into the large, airy, cleanly third-floor front which Mrs. Rothery had scrupulously made ready for their special abode. There was a fine India matting on the floor, and the walls and woodwork were freshly painted what the modern writers on household art call a "good gray." The most careful attention to ventilation had happily included an open coal-fire; but Amory had pleaded in vain for draperies at the windows and rich rugs upon the floor.

"Why should you wish to furnish them with traps to catch every germ of infection? We may not quite know what to do with the souls of these children, Amory; but let us, at least, not enervate their bodies by meaningless indulgence! I insist that there shall be no upholstery in the room, and no rockers. These low, straw-chairs, and the couch with air-cushions, are quite sufficient for lounging,—quite. In the course of time, they will probably themselves add something by way of decoration, but they had much better do it voluntarily out of their own growing taste and culture. I am sure that when you come to think of it, you will agree with me."

Amory yielded, gracefully of course; but he did not consult his monitress about hanging in the room of the sisters two of his own best pictures: a long, woodland vista, with occasional gold dust of penetrating sunlight, by one of those modern Frenchmen who know and love the woods so well; and a fine stretch of purple moorland by an English water-colorist. Mrs. Rothery could not forbear grudging two originals on behalf of her largely increased space of parlor wall; but the few things which Amory did without asking her, she very seldom disputed or even criticised.

"This door leads to your wardrobes and your bath (you will want to make yourselves nice after your journey); here are plenty of towels; here are extra blankets, if you need them; but I had rather you did not touch the fire: I shall see that that is kept in the right condition."

Mrs. Rothery paused before the two little, sable-clad figures, arrested by a searching look in the dark eyes raised to her, and reminded, of a sudden, that something affectionate might here be in order. But she did not feel it — yet; and she said to herself that she would not feign it. Wherefore she merely closed the reading of her orders briskly, as she might have done to a middle-aged guest: —

"We shall have an early tea to-night instead of dinner. Half past six. A high tea, because you have had no proper lunch." And, with what she intended for a wholly propitiatory smile, Mrs. Rothery departed.

Her footsteps were still sounding upon the stairs when Constance defined her position in a low, determined voice: "I hate her!"

Ruth only shook her head, and sank listlessly down upon one of the wicker chairs before the low front windows. There were goodly old-fashioned mansions upon the other side of the way, and even a garden directly opposite; but the dank beds looked ragged under the melting snow, and the prospect was confined and dreary.

"You must n't say that, Connie," said the elder sister, after a dreamy pause, as if she were answering the echo of the other's words.

"But I do!"

"Hush! It's not so bad, I suppose, as being sent to boarding-school, because Guardian is here."

"She'll never let him play with us any more. I wish we were in New Hampshire with Shippie."

"But Shippie said herself that it would be too bleak for us there this winter."

"It's not any bleaker than Boston, I know! Oh, how horrid it all is,—all except the fire and—oh, the woods! You did n't see this lovely picture, Ruthie. It's like that day upon the river in the way the sun comes through the trees!" and the more volatile of the two took a gladsome little excursion into the depths of the canvas, and returned refreshed to her grievances. "What did she mean by 'make yourselves nice'? We are nice, I hope."

"Oh, no! We must bathe, and brush our gowns, and have clean collars."

"Not we ourselves! I won't! I don't know how! Why does n't she send somebody?"

"They seem to have forgotten about that," said Ruth, soothingly. "I shall tell Guardian that we can never brush our hair and gowns ourselves. But to-day we must try." "You must help me, then. So come out of your mazes, Missy!"

By the time their laborious toilet was complete, the brief, dark day had closed, and the red glow of the fire alone resisted the thick-coming shadows.

"I suppose," Connie suggested, recklessly, "you would n't dare light the gas, Ruth?"

"Let us not. I don't know how very well."

"Pooh! I could."

"Oh, no, Connie, pray! Let us sit down here on the rug before the fire."

"I will, if you will tell me a story, and I won't else, for the dark is horrid."

"Well, I will do that." And when they had planted themselves cross-legged before the grate, she straightway began. "Once upon a time there was a beautiful child named Aslang"—

Constance sank into a more comfortable position with a little rustle and sigh of satisfaction, and paid the closest attention, while Ruth rehearsed the tale of the rearing, in pain and poverty, of royal Sigurd's child. In her narration the girl gave a curiously close reproduction of certain of Amory's tricks of speech and gesture, and seemed herself to revel in her own narration.

When at last she had brought her tale to its triumphant conclusion, and had told of the king's wooing, and of Aslang's glad departure with him in his golden ship, she paused, and her sister demanded in injured tones, "Is that all?"

"All, except that the night after they were mar-

ried, they both had the same dream. They saw Aslang's father and mother sitting on their throne in Heaven, and made glad, even there, by the happiness of their child."

Then Constance, who had made occasional interpolated comments, delivered herself of her final judgment upon the tale with critical reserve. "That is quite a good story, Ruthie. And I hope some kings will come before long, and take us away from this place."

"Oh, not away from Guardian!"

Constance had piped up in her loud, clear, thoughtless tone, but when Ruth answered, she spoke low. So the former speech was audible outside the door, while the latter was unheard. Amory had come to fetch the girls, impatient of their long tarrying in their wholesome dormitory, and intolerably nervous about their first impressions. He paused for an instant with his hand upon the latch, and heard the naïve aspiration of the little one with a pang that surprised himself. Not so much for the immediate sense of strangeness and forlornness which the words revealed. Time would, he knew, help that. But time would also make these children women, and how quickly! "And what better can I hope for them," he reflected, "than that their kings may come for them early?" But he found the thought undeniably bitter.

There was nothing but sweetness and gayety in his tone, however, when, having won admission to their bower, he scoffed at the darkness of it, and set all the lights aflame, and proceeded to inspect the toilets which had been made so anxiously. He betrayed no consternation at Ruth's mild request for a maid to dress them, and the thought of its probable effect on Mrs. Rothery, but discussed the matter so cunningly as to persuade her that she had never desired anything of the kind. Then he led the sisters away to his own small sanctum, to pass the rest of the time before tea. No need to say that this room was luxurious, with deep, rich colors and tempered light, and shapes of beauty everywhere. This man had nursed his one sorrow behind a silken screen, and fed it upon dainties. There was a cabinet piano in a recess beyond the bright fire-place, a piano in a marquetry case, with proof-prints of all the great composers grouped above it; and high over all, on a bracket in the duskiest corner, a cast, - the ineffable profile of Michael Angelo's Slave. To that languorous image of final tranquillity Amory had now been looking up for years, and regarding it as the goal of all his hopes. To-night, as he seated himself at the piano in obedience to the first demand of the sisters, and found that his fingers, refusing all the classic adagios in which they had been wont to revel, leaped at once into a gay little gavotte, the assurance was borne in upon him afresh that the duty of dying gracefully was removed to an incalculable distance, and that other responsibilities, infinitely more complex and difficult in their nature, would have to be discharged first.

Mrs. Rothery's high tea, when it was served, was of a kind scientifically calculated to fortify for the activities of this world. She was no niggard, although so strict a theorist, and high art, with her. meant, first of all, wholesome and palatable food. To let a servant, of any grade which she had ever been able to employ, project or design a meal, would have seemed to her like hiring some one to make the first model for a statue. Ruth and Constance were undoubtedly of that rather unmanageable type of children with whom appetite waits cheerfully on all novelty and anticipation, and every excitement whether of pleasure or pain; but even they, on that first night, derived a soupcon of consolation and support from the delicate salad and creamy chocolate, which were Jane's way of recognizing the peculiar claims upon her of the orphan and the fatherless.

CHAPTER VII.

SHOULD the children have private masters, or be sent to school?

Amory had a fastidious dislike of all girls' schools. Mrs. Rothery would, on every account, very much have preferred a school, if one might then have been found capable of furnishing a sufficently thorough, solid, and strengthening course. "And if there is no such school in Boston," said Jane, "where is there one?"

"It does not matter where," said Amory with very unusual curtness; "the children will not be

sent away."

Miss Ingestre, who was present at their councils with heroic punctuality and a reckless disregard of weather, might possibly have influenced a decision more if she had not kept shifting in the most active and playful manner from one side to the other of the argument. She finally planted herself upon Amory's, recollecting and averring with considerable fervor that she was, and always had been, what she described as a "hopeless aristocrat."

This had nearly driven Jane into a peremptory announcement that she would on no account have any teaching in the house, when a new turn was given to the matter by Estelle's beginning to quote the views, on the vexed question, of all and sundry

of her masculine "friends," whom she was already receiving in large numbers, and particularly those of Dr. Forney, for whom Jane had an aversion.

"Now," said Miss Ingestre on the occasion of one of the impromptu morning conferences in Jane's ugly little private room, "I have told you what Charley Johannot says, and you both know how Charley Johannot stands,—an eminent savant, made a professor at twenty-six, with a whole alphabet of F. R. S's. and things after his name, if he chose to write them. But on the other hand, Horatio Forney, who has had souls to shape and save"—and Estelle rolled her blue eyes earnestly, while Jane sniffed a little,—"he says he should not think we would dream for a moment of a recluse education."

"Well, Amory," said Mrs. Rothery, who was sitting at a very mercantile-looking desk, with an account-book open before her, and a pencil suspended in her hand, "if you cannot decide this matter for yourself, you might refer it to a committee of Miss Ingestre's past and present prétendants."

"He would be a kind of honorary member of such a board himself, you know," said Estelle in high glee; and Amory shrugged his graceful shoulders and smiled archly at her, while Jane jotted down an entry in her book.

"Oh," said he, with flute-like mildness, "I never have had any doubt about it. My girls shall learn whatever wise women think they ought to learn, but they are not going to school."

"Bravo!" cried Estelle, clapping her pinky palms, "I do so like to have you assert yourself! Jane, do you hear? He is getting quite beyond us. He has made up his own mind!"

Amory did not feel in the least insulted. He knew the real good-nature of the speaker too well. And in fact they all understood one another admirably.

Arrangements were ultimately completed for the sisters to have masters in almost all departments of learning, and to be taught by the methods then most approved. There was hardly a branch of study to which the elder did not lend herself quickly and kindly; and the remarkable talent for drawing of the younger was recognized, and special instruction provided for her. Music lessons Constance fought hard and finally repudiated, but Ruth was a proficient at the piano in her early teens.

"If their lives are made busy enough, they won't have room for vagaries," was Mrs. Rothery's theory; and she cheerfully included under this head both ebullitions of sensibility and flashes of temper, the occasional stirrings, in Ruth especially, of a deeply religious nature very solemnly impressed by the prostrate devotion of her mother's latest years, and that aversion to herself, passive and rather polite on the part of the elder girl, daring and fierce occasionally on the part of the younger, which she recognized clearly on the night of their arrival, and never either denied or resented. This was one of the points on which Mrs. Rothery was really mag-

nanimous, but her coldness undoubtedly assisted her magnanimity.

"I don't see any particular reason why they should be fond of me," she said one day to Miss Ingestre; "and I'm by no means anxious to have them so. I can do my duty by them quite as well without their affection. As they grow older it would be more embarrassing for them to have affectionate habits. There's apt to be something so specially sickly in the fondness of young women for older ones."

"Good gracious, Jane! How can you speak of those poor babes as 'young women'?"

"Well, that's what they will be before we know it, and a deplorable enough fate it is. I honestly want them prepared to make the best of it."

"I think you do, and so, I am sure, do I."

"Then do not you coddle them out of sight, or I won't let them go to see you. You chose to plant yourself here"—

"Yes, my dear, I did. I make no pretense of having been invited."

"For you to take a certain interest in the children and give them little pleasures now and then, is all very well. You must be throwing money away on something. But you know what I consider the weakest of your weak points, and I won't have you covering the girls up on your satin sofas, and feeding them on chocolate bonbons and romance. There's a precocious kind of sentimentality about Ruth already, which Amory continually nourishes by the music he makes her enjoy, and

the poetry he teaches her to read, and the sort of church to which he dutifully attends her,—the highest of the high,—he, you know, the sad and solitary sceptic of so many years! I can't say much on this point, however, wholly as I hate superstition, for the old lawyer in New York has written a curt recommendation that they go regularly to church. He implies that they are unfortunately situated in a land of heathen blindness. Odd, is it not, for a lawyer to take that tone?"

"Not as odd in New York as it would be here."

"Well, I have n't been used to think of it as a pious metropolis; but do you remember what I

say."

Mere sagacity, however, unhelped by sympathy, is always at a disadvantage. It seems never to provide for all contingencies. If Mrs. Rothery had been yet a little more astute, she would have remembered that a love of romance almost always goes along with a love of mystery; and that she doubled the zest to Estelle, of studying and flattering the foibles of the girls by suggesting that it would have to be done more or less secretly. As a result of her warnings, when the sisters set forth for their daily walk, shivering under a wealth of furs which had previously been the subject of some polite contention between Mrs. Rothery and their guardian, they were quite likely, before they had rounded more than two or three breathless corners to see recklessly pulled up in the glacial gutter beside them, a coupé lined with azure satin, and, while a cream-gloved hand from within threw open the door, a gurgling little voice cried, out of a hillock of ermine and ostrich plumes,—

"You charming little doves, you are perfectly blue! Come straight into this atom of an ark with me! Squeeze yourself into the seat beside me, Ruth. Connie, drop right down among the rugs. I protest I will own a two seated vehicle. Coupés are so selfish, and hired hacks are so stuffy! Don't you think so, darlings? Exercise, is it? Well this is exercise just as much as the other, only of a little different sort. Carriage exercise, you know. I'll take the responsibility. But first of all, you must come home to lunch with me. No? Won't it answer? Would she be too indignant with us? I feel as if we were all little girls together, but we must not be very naughty, you know. I will have you come and lunch with me next Saturday, and you may tell Mrs. Rothery that I asked you, and I will tell her, too. And in the afternoon - but never mind about that! There might possibly be objections, and I'd rather surprise you! Only wear your Sunday hats please. Say that I desired it, and some nice, light gloves. Oh! You are in mourning! Well, I have heaps of lavender ones myself, and I know that mine would fit you." And Estelle withdrew her own baby palms from her white muff, and regarded them affectionately during a pause of more than a second.

"And now you don't look as though you'd had an atom of candy since I saw you last. Have you,

candidly? Why, I've made a pun, haven't I? Candid, candy, you know! Henry! Henry!"—this to the coachman,—"drive around by Copeland's."

Constance was already on sufficiently good terms with her rosy benefactress to embrace the latter's knees from her own somewhat constrained position.

"I guess about Saturday afternoon," she cried, "you are going to take us to the opera!" And even the more reserved Ruth flushed and brightened inquiringly.

But Miss Ingestre shook her plumed head and flaxen curls like an exceedingly young and tender sphinx. "I shall not tell. No, never! Not if you guess right forty times. I don't wish any one to know. And put these bonbon boxes flat in your coat-pockets, thus, where they cannot be seen when you go in! Now, Henry, to Butternut Street."

It was not very good training for the children in openness and honor; and, alas! they had had lessons in concealment earlier yet, — such as the daughters of an unhappy wife are almost sure to receive.

When Saturday arrived it was lowering, and Mrs. Rothery, while acceding to the lunch, peremptorily interdicted the Sunday hats.

Ruth had enough of tact—that usually adult virtue—to have submitted quietly, but Constance lifted up her voice with fiery assurance.

"Miss Ingestre said we were to wear our Sunday hats."

Mrs. Rothery bent upon the young remonstrant a decidedly blighting look. "Miss Ingestre, little girl, has nothing whatever to do with your wardrobe."

"She is very kind to us," cried Constance, who had dreams about costume, and was already restless in her mourning, "and she wears lovely things herself, and you never do!"

Mrs. Rothery thought that Estelle was really passing the limits of her own proper playfulness, and that she must tell her so. But she continued to regard the palpitating little speaker coolly and curiously, merely saying, with a faint, dry smile, "Don't you know that it is bad manners for you to make remarks about my clothes? But now go."

Once outside the house, Constance fled along the slippery pavements at a pace hardly possible for Ruth. She did not even wait for her sister at Miss Ingestre's door, but darted past the servant and into the short, soft arms of that lady, who had come out into the hall to receive her young guests.

"See!" said the child, dashing down her close little sealskin cap. "She made us wear these things. She would not let us be nice as you said."

"Ah, well," said Estelle, the logical and judicious, with an abundance of soothing caresses, "then of course you must do as she says. But you are a picture always, and I shall give you some soft, charming white clouds to wrap your little angel heads in when we go to the — Ah! where is Ruth?"

"She is coming. Here she is! Then we are going to the matinée! Dear, precious, pretty Miss Ingestre, will you take us to see Marguerite?"

It was exactly what she was affectionately plotting. Amory, remembering that his playthings were to be absent that Saturday afternoon, felt attracted but feebly towards the domicile where he was not as fully wonted, lunched fancifully down town, and afterwards strayed into the theatre, in time for the garden scene in "Faust." But his attention was early distracted from the scene by observing Estelle in a stage-box, with a rather youthful cavalier on either side of her, while, pressing naïvely close to the front, hand in hand, as they were wont to sit unconsciously when absorbed in the same interest, with parted lips, and dreamy eyes, and splendid color, were — his girls!

Well, why not? He could hardly give an account to himself of the revulsion of feeling with which he turned his eyes again upon the stage. There the moonlight broadened, the roses bloomed, the languorous, dulcet, dying music suffused all the scene with its enervating enchantment.

"O Mondenschein, der uns umhüllt Selig beisammen,"

sang the fiery Faust —

"Ich liebe Dich so inniglich Bin ganz der Deine,"

sang the girlish, artless Marguerite, with drooping head.

Amory made an impulsive start towards Miss

Ingestre's box, then restrained himself until the close of the act, but before the curtain was fairly down, he was by her side. Her previous attendants were enough younger than himself to stand somewhat in awe of a certain prestige he bore, and retired before him; but, for once in his life, he forgot his manners, and responded neither to the enthusiastic welcome of the children, nor to the sprightly greeting of their chaperone. He merely dropped into a seat beside Miss Ingestre and said hurriedly, in her ear:—

"What possessed you to bring the girls here?"

"I wanted to give them pleasure, to be sure," answered the heiress, rather angrily, for her temper was hasty. "What did you suppose?"

"I don't approve of it."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Miss Ingestre, dropping on the floor her mother-of-pearl fan and operaglass. "Do I hear aright?"

Constance picked up the bijouterie, scanning her guardian the while rather anxiously, for she had never seen him frown before; but Ruth's eyes had already wandered away, and were fixed with vague suspense upon the fallen curtain.

Amory smiled a little, and began to recover his society manner. "Pardon!" he said. "I know you meant it all in kindness, but"—

" Well?

"Let us not talk about it here. They had better stay it out now and have their hearts entirely broken. That's not so bad"—

"Oh, no! Quite harmless in most cases, I have observed!"

"Don't be so merciless!" murmured the young maidens' guide, giving Estelle one of his many expressive looks infinitesimally reproachful and irresistibly persuasive. "But take me round with you when this is done, and let me assume the responsibility for it to Jane, who, I know, was not consulted."

"I did not intend her to know at all."

"Oh, well, you know, I cannot possibly have anything indirect. I'm doubtful on some points; but I do go in for telling the truth. But in the evening I will come to you, and we will have a friendly pow-wow about the whole of it. No more now"—And he relieved Constance's mind by turning and

smiling on her brilliantly.

It was not in the nature of things that Estelle should decline a friendly pow-wow with a handsome man, nor that she should omit to have the fair curls about her chubby visage brushed and twined afresh by her maid, and a turquoise butterfly set atop of them, and a good deal of her precious lace disposed about her neck and dimpled wrists. But she saw in an instant, when Amory arrived, that he was in a very serious mood, and less accessible even than usual. A genuine apprehension seized her as she lifted her eyes to his troubled brow, and she showed no little skill as a tactician in darting forthwith upon his flank.

"You need not tell me, Amory, that I am to

stop trying to mitigate the fate of the little Curwens, for I won't do it! We none of us know too well how they ought to be treated "—

"That's profoundly true, Miss Ingestre."

"Why this ridiculous affectation of formality? Call me Estelle, and be a man."

Amory was amused, in spite of himself, at the obvious logical connection between these two requests. He followed his hostess up to the great white bearskin which lay invitingly before the blazing fire in what she called her "blush-rose boudoir;" but while she sank into the depths of a very deep and low arm-chair, he leaned his elbow on the one unoccupied corner of the lace-draped, laden mantel-piece and studied the leaping blaze. At last he looked at her and said, in his most winning tones, "I find it very hard to begin just what I wanted to say."

"Yes," assented Estelle sympathetically, shaking her ringlets behind a rose-embroidered hand-screen. "I can perfectly understand that."

"I know so well the utter kindness and generosity of your intentions and I am so keenly sensible that my wards need all the disinterested kindness

they can get"—

"Yes, Amory Wallis, I think they do!"

"But can you not see yourself that it would be better for them to feel that there is one undivided rule over them; and not that there is a bountiful fairy at hand, who is ever ready to help them evade even stern regulations, and put premature, and dubious, and intoxicating kinds of delight where they can —forgive me! — steal them?"

"You are very kind to describe me as a fairy, but very unjust, I think, when you speak of those dear innocents as stealing the pleasures which I choose to give them."

"Heaven forbid that I should blame them!"

"Yes, indeed! And I hope that Heaven will peremptorily forbid you to assume the rôle of a stern moralist, Amory, for it doesn't suit you at all."

"Do you think it would be austere in me to insist on perfect openness on the part of my wards?"

"Perhaps not for you to insist; but I can tell you one thing, — no woman ever yet was perfectly open, or ever will be, not your sister Jane herself!"

"It seems to me certain, however, that I cannot have them taught that."

It was a mild enough piece of self-assertion, of the kind which Estelle was wont in other moods rather disrespectfully to applaud, but it produced an extraordinary effect upon her now. She regarded him intently for a moment, then her bright blue eyes brimmed suddenly and overflowed, and she busied herself with wiping the unmistakable and fast-coming tears away, while Amory watched her fairly aghast. When at last she found voice, her tones were broken and plaintive, but entirely and curiously sincere.

"There, you see how it is! I knew I was becoming perfectly bound up in them. I suppose — don't you? — it's what they call the maternal instinct, — re—re—pressed. Of course you can order me"

(sob) "never to interfere any more in the management of your wards; and I shall have to o-" (another sob) "bey. But I love and pity them with all my heart. I do indeed. It must be the maternal instinct. And I don't mean to teach them to deceive. I particularly avoided asking Jane if they might go to the opera, because I knew she would be very likely to say no, just out of her instinctive objection to their being too happy; and of course I would not take the responsibility of their actually disobeying her. But it 's not at all as if Jane herself had any natural right over them. I admire Jane's great qualities as much as any one. I always say so, and I do, and you know it. I like to measure my own intellectual force with hers, for I don't concede that I 'm a fool, Amory, although you may think that I'm behaving like one just now. But you know that Jane has not one grain of real tenderness in her, unless it be a condescending sort for yourself. And I ask you whether you think you can afford to dispense with mine - mistaken and impulsive though you may think it to be - in the bringing up of these ardent, sensitive, clinging, charming little creatures. I ask you, Amory! When you talk of one undivided rule over them, you mean Jane Rothery's rule, for no other can ever be undivided where she is. Do you dare to bind them down to that?"

Amory was abstractedly silent. He had forgotten the speaker's absurdities. No one had ever yet brought home to his mind so clearly the extent,

nay, terror, of the responsibility which lay upon his hands. "Indeed," he said presently, "I would not dare. I do not wish to restrain your affection for the girls, and I don't think"— with instinctively flattering gentleness— "that you would quite know how to withdraw it. But—perhaps you will think that it is your turn to call me foolish now— I don't myself want them taken to the opera much; at least not to Faust."

Estelle shrugged her shoulders. The implied rebuke was a hard one for any woman to bear, but she was as much in earnest as she knew how to be, and she strove honestly to put aside her sense of personal pique. "Of course I know," she responded rather meekly, "that there are people who have such scruples, but it is very strange to think of you as one of them."

"All I can say is, that they sprang up within me full grown the moment I found myself looking upon that hackneyed garden scene with the eyes of a little maiden. Was it not the same with you?"

"Perhaps it ought to have been, but upon my word I don't think I really looked at it; 't is so hackneyed, as you say! And those two boys were chattering all the time about the singing."

"By the way, who were the boys?"

"Whittington Rand and Tom Fielding."

"Well-grown lads! How grateful Master Whittington would be to you for the epithet! Oh, Miss In—Estelle, it is all wrong! We are all so wretchedly sophisticated, have squandered our real emotions so long ago! Had I not better put my little girls in a convent school?"

"Yes," said Estelle, with suddenly recovered spirit, "if you want to intensify and confirm all the harm which you are allowing your morbid fancy to conjure up! Come now, Amory, don't suffer yourself to become a - betty! You have been rather impertinent, and I have been very good. Now let us both be reasonable. It is not probable that I shall be always at hand to put temptation in the way of your darlings, -my darlings, too, you know" (Amory waved his slender hand deprecatingly); "and I promise you faithfully that I will never take them anywhere again without consent of the authorities. They are likely to have small enough intervals for recreation by the time Jane's fierce educational plans, which you seem trustfully to have adopted, are in full working order. Those plans, of course, look towards making them perfect book-worms, at least for the present, and I shall thrust in a little brightness for the dear things whenever I can. It shall not be what you call 'premature and dubious delight,' if I can help it, or if I myself know what that is!" And the blonde shook out her laces with entirely restored complacency, and cast down her eyes with a droll expression of affected simplicity, at which Amory could not help laughing, although it made him a little desperate.

He felt that it would be boorish to take his leave at once, so he acceded to a proposal for cribbage, and was beaten by his hostess in three successive games at a beautiful sandal-wood and ivory board, before they were interrupted by Dr. Forney, who had arranged an exchange for the next day, and had therefore a Saturday evening out.

Then Amory slowly walked home, although the snow which the morning clouds had foreboded was already falling thickly. His own self-confidence was at an exceedingly low ebb. He felt worsted and perplexed. He almost hated the thought of his own infirm past, which had left him so little capacity for independent decision and vigorous action. Would it not really be better for the children as well as easier for himself — or, at any rate, the best thing practicable, the least of evils — if Jane's will were understood to be their final and unalterable law? But Jane would have them made esprits forts by the shortest and surest method, and how could he suffer that?

CHAPTER VIII.

From the anxious and vacillating mood in which we saw him last, Amory Wallis can hardly be said to have issued during the first year of his guardianship. Additions were required in the little seaside cottage to adapt it to the enlarged family; and these, though limited by Mrs. Rothery to a schoolroom on the ground-floor and a bedroom for the sisters above it, detained them late in town. Soon after their removal to the seaside, Ruth had an illness. It was not very severe, but sufficient to furnish a reason for declining the earnest request of Hannah Shippen, with whom Constance kept up a faithful correspondence, that the children might be allowed to come and visit her in her New Hampshire home. In September they were to have gone to Judge Ford's in New York, where also Amory's presence was officially required at that time; but there again illness interfered, - fatal illness this time of the judge's well-beloved wife.

So the autumn came and an early winter, before the end of which the lives and purposes of all our people were lifted a little and swept aside by a change in the great current of human affairs.

George Eliot speaks somewhere in one of her incisive sentences of "the temptation to long for luck

in the shape of a widespread calamity." What sort of luck it was for Ruth and Constance Curwen that their second winter in Boston was the ominous and agitating winter of 1860-61, who shall say?

Some portion of the intense and rather morbid attention which their guardian was beginning to concentrate on their words and ways, was diverted to larger if not graver issues, and so much was well, no doubt, both for them and him. Before another summer had gone by, our friends had divided on political questions. Miss Ingestre became a gushing Southern sympathizer, and a voluble Southern apologist. Mrs. Rothery's clear and vigorous mind, unbefogged by sympathies or sentiments of any kind, admitted only two ideas: the necessity of upholding, at all hazards, a righteous rule, and the positive joy of reducing silly malcontents to silence, and coercing them into submission. She thought she knew that she could herself have been that one clairvoyant, reckless, ruthless general who might have saved our whole country so much anguish if the North had had him at the first; and there were times when it chafed her excessively that her tactics must be wasted on soldiers' aid meetings, and her financial abilities frittered away on the advantageous purchasing of blue flannel and condensed milk.

With Amory the question soon narrowed itself down to a strictly personal one. How late, how soon, should he himself go to the war? It was nat-

ural that the obvious reasons against his going at all - the supposed delicacy of his health, and the increasing extent, and at present really formidable complexity, of the business cares incident to his guardianship - should have acted, with a person of his temperament, as additional incentives or stings to desperate action. The time came when he felt his sister's curt and rather contemptuous dissuasions, and Miss Ingestre's buoyant incredulity, as alike humiliating; and one morning, early in the dreadful autumn of 1862, he returned from town to the seaside, and Jane met him just where she had done when he came from Cornelia Curwen's funeral three years before; and he kissed her gracefully. and handed her, along with the heart-sickening newspaper, his own lieutenant's commission.

She read the document carefully from beginning to end, as if with the expectation of discovering some flaw in it, and finally handed it back to him with the dry remark, "Well, I hope that you are at least satisfied with yourself."

"I hope I shall have reason to be so hereafter," he answered quietly; "and you, too."

"I'm afraid you're just as likely to be shot as another."

"I suspect so. You can't expect me to own that I'm afraid of that."

"In such an event, I hope you will have left some indication of your wishes for the young women you are bringing up."

"You know yourself, Jane, that you think they

would fare quite as well without me; but they have another guardian. I shall write to Judge Ford immediately."

"Then you have not consulted him already?"

"No, and I have no notion how he will take it. I don't think he ever paid me the compliment of dreaming of my enlistment. But he's a sturdy old patriot himself, and at all events there's no turn-

ing back now."

Somebody had been playing Mendelssohn's "Spring Song" directly behind the closed Venetian blinds of one of the veranda windows when Amory arrived with his rather exciting intelligence. The music, spirited at first and vivid in expression, despite its undercurrent of tristesse, had lagged in time, grown fainter, and ceased. Jane handed her brother back his document, and stalked around to the rear of the cottage to give her orders for dinner. Amory turned into the cool, shady little hall, with eyes a trifle blinded by the glare of the September sea, and was the more startled when a lithe, white-clad figure flung itself before him, and he felt his hands clutched firmly by a pair of very slim but nervously strong ones.

"What is it, Guardian?" cried a breathless

young voice. "Tell me quick!"

"My dearest Ruth, did you hear?"

She gave a piercing cry, which he only hoped might not be audible in the kitchen. "You are going to the war!"

"My child, compose yourself. I am going for a

little while."

"You will never come back! They will kill you! Oh, no — you can 't — go! Don't leave us!"

"Yes, indeed, dear girl, I must go, but I shall come back."

" No - no!"

He could see now that she was as white as her gown, and beginning to turn dizzy and blind. He threw his arm around her and drew her to the hall sofa, just as Constance, who had heard her sister's voice in distress, came flying to her rescue in a brown Holland pinafore, with a crayon-holder in her hand.

"What ails my Ruthie?"

"Fetch her some water, Con," said Amory, much perturbed at heart, but trying to speak lightly. "She is not quite well."

But Ruth lifted her head and partially recovered herself by a really surprising effort. "No, Connie, not ill!" she gasped. "Don't go! He — he is going away to the army to fight and be killed!"

Constance stopped short, and leaned over the newel-post towards her sister, her eyes blazing with a new, and to Amory perfectly incomprehensible expression. "And so I think he ought," she exclaimed, with a little stamp of her foot.

"Thanks, Connie," said Amory gently. "That is kind in you." But Ruth broke down again into

hysterical sobbing: —

"You want him to die!"

"No, I don't!" was the answer, with another stamp.

To these three, at this juncture, entered by the glass door at the back of the hall Mrs. Rothery, who seemed to comprehend the situation at a

glance.

"What! faint, Ruth?" she said briskly. "You had much too long a walk yesterday. I knew it at the time. Go straight to your own room and bed, and have a good, long sleep. Constance, your nose is smutty. Amory, can you give me a few moments? I would like to see you alone."

That very evening, as Amory sat, pen in hand, before the writing-desk in his own room, searching for space, as is the inveterate habit of a literary dilettante, for the simplest and aptest words in which to convey to Judge Ford his newly taken resolution, a letter was brought him, addressed in the large, clear, ugly characters of that veteran himself:—

"My Dear Sir, — I have had a slight attack of which the doctors conceal the name so ingeniously that there can be, I think, no doubt of its nature. They order me out of the country for rest, etc., and I shall go. Gray hairs and shaken nerves are not the things most wanted here just now. Perhaps I can make my gift of the gab useful over yonder.

"The case of James Bent et al. v. Heirs of Cornelia Curwen will probably come up during the November term. Certain facts have just come to my knowledge which I wish to impart to you by word of mouth before I go. Passage taken for the 20th. Let me see you here this week if possible.

"Hold on to the B. &. O. shares of course. With regard to the seven-thirties" — etc.

So Amory threw aside the letter which had refused in so unmanly a fashion to write itself, and started for New York the next evening, thus giving the three whom he left behind a foretaste of the level and sedate life which was to be theirs for many months to come.

"At all events," thought Jane, with an aquiline, sidelong glance at the wan face and listless figure which Ruth showed at the breakfast table on the morning after this first departure, "I'll have no more hysterics. Things are not working wholly ill. Heaven be praised, I can now do exactly as I like!"

First of all, therefore, she reconsidered once again the regular menu on which so much honest thought had already been expended, studying it by the light of all the nutrition-tables, and classifications of nerve, bone, and muscle-feeders appended to all the sanitary treatises with which the press was teeming at that time; and the result of her researches appeared in divers changes in their daily fare, tending to approximate it somewhat to that of an abundantly supplied camp. Out of her own large wisdom, rising superior to all tables, Mrs. Rothery then substituted Scotch ale for water, as a noon beverage for her subjects, and set down in her crowded and hieroglyphical note-book a formula which meant that horses were to be purchased for the sisters; and their guardian's departure for the seat of war made a pretext — here she could not forbear a sardonic smile — for increasing her corps of servants by a man, who could officiate as groom upon their rides.

Furthermore, she prepared a crafty snare for the younglings - Ruth especially - on this wise. She requested them one day, with the air of one who confers a hardly deserved distinction, to add up for her some rather confused accounts, just handed in by one of her minions in the Relief Society; and returning, after a short but suitable interval, for the result of their labors, she found the poor little things in a state bordering on madness, and descended upon their bewildered arithmetic with crushing scorn. Half their music and drawing lessons were cut off forthwith, and the time thus gained consecrated to instruction in the primary principles of figures, which Jane herself-undertook to superintend, and did so efficiently; holding out, however, a cheerful promise of a regular mathematical tutor ("fifty at least and bald," was her mental reservation), whenever they should be sufficiently advanced to profit by his instructions.

All these reforms were actually inaugurated within the ten days of Amory's absence in New York, whence he returned under orders to join his regiment immediately. He denied, with something like petulance, that he was looking either worn or worried; and refused to repeat, even to Jane, Judge Ford's first comment on what Amory himself now mentioned ironically as his "lapse into patriotism."

He admitted one day, however, when alone with his sister, that the stout old lawyer was possessed by a presentiment that he himself should never return from abroad.

"I don't think so," said Amory. "He seems to me to have the strength of a Hercules, and the fight of a Wellington in him yet; but his wife's death was a terrible blow to him, and he is cut to the heart, despite the brusque front he bears, by the presumable ruin of his country. If the sea should chance to swallow him up—and if—but what's the use of foreshadowing? That die is cast, at all events; and I am not yet sorry that I had the strength to make all fast before I told any of you."

"It was weakness," was the curt reply of the natural warrior; "but in this case it comes to much the same thing. I don't remember that you have ever had any premonitions of rheumatism. That's my principal apprehension for you; but you will find your flannels all right."

Amory bowed in silence his acknowledgment of her providential care, and then sank into rather a protracted fit of musing. Finally he roused himself with an effort, and gathered up, preparatory to leaving the room, some letters and bills of his which were scattered about the table. He paused before Mrs. Rothery's chair as he went out, however, and said, trying hard to exclude from his tone a touch of wistfulness:—

"I hope, Jane, you will excuse me if I say, before I go, that you have been very good to me."

Jane was "binding the heel" of a soldier's sock; and any woman who has ever relieved her patriotic feelings in that way knows that the operation is a ticklish one. She did not lift her eyes until it was concluded, but nodded in a provisional manner, and Amory went on:—

"It is all owing to you that I have a life now, such as it is, to offer my country."

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Rothery, lifting her released knitting-needles, and brandishing them in a way which faintly suggested the conventional lightnings of Jove. "It's not necessary to talk about that. I did the best I could in your case for one concerning whose temperament I could know little or nothing by experience; and it is a solid satisfaction to me to believe that, if I had known more, I could not possibly have done as well. And you may rest assured that it will be the same with the girls. I know," she added, leaning back for a moment in her tall chair, while her steely little weapons continued to glance fitfully in her strong hand, and Amory waited patiently before her, - "I know well enough that you were about to put in one more plea for indulgence to them. Now, then, don't! Believe that I know exactly what is best for them. And, Amory, if you really are oppressed by any such feeling of gratitude as you hinted at just now, promise me one thing, - that you will not have any sort of scene with the children -especially Ruth — before you go."

"I do not quite know what you mean by a scene,"

he said with some dignity. "Good-byes must be spoken in this world; and even the young, alas! must learn to say them."

"Oh, yes, general good-byes, and they are bad enough; but not intense and particular good-byes to girls in their first teens. That's all! Constance Curwen is still, to all intents and purposes, a child; but Ruth has just fairly come into her hysterical years, and she is in incessant peril of making the sort of display of herself which she will regret, more than any one else, one of these days. I consider it one part of your duty as her guardian, which you can still perform, to see that she does n't have a fit of any kind to-morrow. Upon my word, I mean no more than I have said. It is great luck for us that Estelle Ingestre chose to take that long Western trip this year, and so has been out of the way during this flurry. It would have been much harder for you to get off quietly if she had been here gushing and gamboling."

"Good Estelle! Will she yearn over me as a misguided rebel, I wonder, or what will be her cue? But I would have liked to see her once more, and I shall write her at an early day. Good-night, you imperturbable wise-wife!" and Amory departed with the ghost of a smile upon his lips, half shamed for the moment out of the heaviness of his own heart.

He had had a vague purpose of giving back into Ruth's keeping, before he left, the little portfolio which she had delivered to him on the memorable night when he saw her first. If he were not to return, it would surely be fittest that it should pass into her keeping. No other eyes ought to see its contents; none, at least, when any lived who remembered its first unhappy owner or himself. Ought even hers? Not yet had he himself gone through the whole of those heart-rending memoirs. The sense of vain and irremediable anguish which they revived always overpowered him before he had looked very far. He barely knew of what the collection consisted, — a few very trifling mementos of himself, yet everything which had escaped the first fierce gathering of letters and keepsakes to be returned, made when Cornelia had believed him false; one letter of passionate remorse and uttermost acquittal, written after she had learned the truth, and boldly addressed to him, but never sent; another in phrases of fire, the maddest record of all to save, which could be read only as a cry for rescue from her fate, - a long letter this, but never finished; fragments of irregular verse, the language, often the paper, saturated with tears, written for the most part in hours of still despondency bordering on despair - many prayers. He essayed one more look among these pitiful remains that night, before he went to rest, then enclosed the portfolio, sealed it strongly, directed it upon the cover to Ruth Curwen in case he perished in the war, and locked it away among his most private possessions.

"If you are watching me now" — his lips all but shaped the words, so strong was his sense of an urgent, and perhaps reproachful presence at his side, pleading and to be pleaded with — "if you know anything of us, my poor love, you know the whole, and how sharp is the strain upon me of conflicting duties. But surely they had better suffer some pain at my hands now, than lose all respect for me hereafter? That would be a betrayal of your trust indeed!" The sobbing of the autumn wind was his reply.

Those conflicting claims, if he had but known it, were personified and separately contending in the chamber of the sisters during that midnight hour, while he hurriedly arranged his most cherished effects for a possible review by other eyes than his own.

"Have n't you been asleep yet, Ruth?" Constance had crossed softly from one little white bed to the other, startled between two of her own dreamless naps by the sound of a suppressed sob.

"No, dear."

"Oh, Ruth, why will you be so wretched? How can he help going to fight for his country? He would n't be — Guardian — he would n't be — be anybody if he did n't!"

"I know it! I know it!"

"Well, then! Do be a little brave yourself! Just think of the ballads you recite so beautifully about heroes, and all that! And the warlike songs you love to sing!

"'One moment ere the trumpets blow."

It gives me chills just to think how you can sing that!"

"You will have real chills, Con, if you stand out there in the night. It seems to me very cold. I know there is a great storm coming. Lean down where I can put my arms round you." Constance complied, and Ruth dropped her hot head for an instant on the soft, round shoulder. "All those war-songs, that I have shown off with before company, seem to me so hollow and fanciful now," she continued. "I had just a safe girl's dream about glory, but never a notion until now what real, deadly danger is."

"But it's the danger that is the glory, dear! Danger is just what the brave desire. You would not be a coward, Ruth, if you are a girl."

"I do not think one would mind danger so much for one's self, but for those whom we love it is terrible. I know it must be; but it is terrible. I try to say my prayers and give him up,"—here she began to sob again,— "but I cannot. What would the world become to us, what would it do to us, if he were dead? We have lost all but him. I sometimes think our mother, who gave us to him, would tell him not to go."

She cried uncontrollably for a few minutes, and then said much more quietly, "All those silly songs of mine, Connie, are gone into one, —

"'Men must work and women must weep!""

"No, they must not weep," cried Constance, energetically dashing away her own tears. "That is what they must never do! I am sure of it! Oh, what can I say to make you brave again?

I'm afraid you will break down to-morrow, when dear Guardian goes away, and that would be too shameful."

The morrow, in its outward aspect, fulfilled Ruth's dark foreboding, and brought a fierce autumnal gale. Amid roaring wind, and flying leaves, and pouring rain, Amory took his final departure, but it was Connie who sobbed outright at the last moment, like the child she really was, while Ruth returned his long kiss with tremulous tranquillity, and promised in an almost steady voice to write him twice a week.

All that September day the tempest raved. The cottage swayed to the storm, a dense mist blotted out the sea, the salt spray drenched the veranda and splashed the long French windows, the intermittent floods devastated the garden, while the wind maintained a merciless cannonade. Mrs. Rothery had the whole house, and especially Amory's beautiful sitting-room, reduced to temporary chaos, that it might afterwards be put in cheerless order: but at night, when the rage for action in herself was appeased, she caused a particularly brilliant fire to be lighted on the diningroom hearth, and summoned the sisters to enjoy it, even before their daintiest of dinners was served.

They were just beginning to glow a little under its genial influence, and to realize that Mrs. Rothery was in an exceptionally humane mood, when the three were startled alike by the sharpest bellpeal ever heard in that decorous house, and by the immediately succeeding sounds of great commotion in the entrance hall.

"Gone!" they heard uttered, in a little breathless shriek, — "gone, this very day!" and in another instant Miss Ingestre stood among them, swathed to her eyes in blue waterproof cloth, and panting with exertion and agitation.

"A chair? Yes. Thanks, love. But oh, to think that I am too late! Jane, how could you let him go to that wicked, wicked war? So unfit even if he were on the right side! Night and day I traveled, night and day, after I saw his appointment! All the way from Minneapolis! It seemed Heaven's own mercy that Horatio Forney was there to take care of me; but if he had not been I should have come alone. Yes, alone! He had a telegram about that poor wife of his and was hurrying too. I don't mean to thank Heaven that she is worse. In fact, I hardly know what I do mean, my disappointment is so bitter. Did you think I would not read the papers — would not try to make him listen to right and reason? I am talking about Amory now. Oh, Jane, to think what your fanatical opinions may have brought upon us all! My poor forsaken darlings, how are you? Why did I leave at such a critical time?"

Mrs. Rothery had recovered from her momentary amazement. "Estelle," said she, marching upon her unexpected visitor with something like wrath, and beginning to unfasten her damp garments for her very fiercely, "this is great non-

sense. Amory is a free agent. What difference could your being here possibly have made? You seem a little upset by your absurdly hurried journey. How did you get over from the station? Are you much wet? Apparently not, under your wrappings. Come now and dine with us and be rational. And mind you talk no treason."

"Of course I shall dine here, and sleep here too. Where else? My own house is not ready for me. I tell you I came on a half hour's notice, just as soon as I saw that regiment ordered to the front, and his name among the officers. First I fainted, or very near it, and then I came. I thought I might be in time to prevent one costly and useless sacrifice, but it seems not. To think of Amory fighting against his own countrymen and not on the gentleman's side, either! Throwing off his most sacred obligations! Ruth, Constance, kiss me! Jane, I cannot deny that it is good to see you again, but, believe me, you will repent this!"

She was by this time divested of her damp wrappings, but still looked strange, for the rain, which had beaten in her rosy face on the way from the station, had straightened for the time the short curls with which her forehead was usually aureoled, and gave an unwonted solemnity to her appearance.

"Fetch me some light little wrap, you poor bereaved child," she said feelingly to Constance. "Blue, if you have it. Then I shall be sure to take no cold. And a pair of your own slippers. No others will fit me. Even under these sad circumstances, how glad I am to see you all!"

Upon the whole, her presence proved most enlivening. By the time the arrested dinner was actually served, she could intersperse her lamentations over the sacrifice of Amory, and the abandonment of his wards, and her incoherent profession of Confederate sympathies, with droll anecdotes of her headlong and futile journey, and warm praises of the white soup.

Jane swallowed her compliments grimly, and scoffed at her opinions heartily. She was presently so gratified by the consciousness of having completely dismembered her guest in argument, that she did not disdain telling her, before they parted for the night, how Amory had himself proposed writing her very soon.

CHAPTER IX.

In the end it was arranged for Miss Ingestre to remain as Mrs. Rothery's guest, during the brief remnant of their stay at the seaside. In fact, she invited herself to do so on the day after her arrival, with a certain calm but earnest cordiality.

"Even if I could collect my household on such a sudden notice it would hardly be worth while for these few weeks, and I think perhaps my highest

duty lies here."

"What do you mean, Estelle?" said Mrs. Rothery, rather sharply. "If it will be a convenience for you to stay, I can hardly turn you out, but don't for pity's sake fancy that you have a mission,

least of all to the girls."

Estelle fixed her azure eyes full on her companion, with an air of mild reproach. Though still separated from her maid, she had recovered a good deal of her wonted distinction of appearance. Her forehead was once more adorned by a halo of pale yellow floss, she wore a vast loose robe (tea-gowns were not as yet) of turquoise-hued brocade, and balanced the heavy tassels of its ceinture carefully with her two dimpled hands, while she continued, after an impressive pause,—

"Do you happen, Jane, ever to have heard of the

motto, Noblesse oblige? If I stay here I shall certainly respect the rights of hospitality, and not tamper with the political principles, false as I think them, which you have taught to Amory, and are trying to instill into his wards. But I shall brighten the house for them with my native sprightliness; and if I go directly into Amory's rooms, which will be the best arrangement, I shall fill them with gay flowers and have my books, and pretty work, and all my little possessions strewn about" (Jane grunted slightly), "and that will prevent their being invaded by a morbid and funereal atmosphere."

"There's something in that. I don't want Ruth — either of them — cherishing feelings of senti-

mental woe about those closed rooms."

"You particularize Ruth, dear Jane. Is it possible that you already detect?"—

"Nothing of the sort," interrupted Mrs. Rothery brusquely, vexed with herself for having suggested any distinction; but it was too late. Ruth was already registered in Miss Ingestre's expansive heart as the object of her most intimate and tender compassion. She was astute enough, however, to continue her plea for residence in a comparatively matter-of-fact tone.

"And then, you see, I do very much want—I promised Horatio on the journey—to stay in this neighborhood, until we know how it is going to turn this time with poor Mrs. Forney."

"That was taking time by the forelock indeed!"

"For shame, Jane! There's more than an even

chance, I think, that the poor thing will rally again, and have, after all, a slow and very distressing decline. They had taken rooms for six weeks, you know, at that forlorn hotel — Peacock's, down on the Point, out of the world, to be sure, yet quite within driving distance from here; and I could go often to see her, and supply her with a good many little comforts in my thoughtful, unostentatious way — In short, I am a thousand times obliged to you, dear Jane, and I accept gratefully."

After this even Mrs. Rothery felt that she had

nothing more to say.

Estelle's many boxes were forthwith conveyed into Amory's quarters, where she hinted that it would not be at all difficult to arrange a place for her maid also; but this motion was nipped in the bud by her involuntary hostess in the most sum-

mary manner.

"No, that I won't have. You can do excellently well without Fifine for these few weeks, and Ruth is so helpless by nature, and so prone, do the best I can to brace her, to every species of personal luxury, that it would stir up all her old sense of grievance at my not allowing her and Con a maid of their own."

Constance rejoiced openly in the immediate occupation of her guardian's rooms, and was delighted with the new air of chaotic sumptuousness which Miss Ingestre had caused to pervade them before she had been their tenant more than a few hours; but several days passed ere Ruth could be induced to enter them at all.

Estelle's warm heart was literally overflowing toward the pensive maiden who trod the "trivial round," and applied herself to the "common task" so dutifully, but with so distant, and at times so exalted, an expression in her starry eyes. Never had Ruth seemed to her half so interesting; and as for her beauty, the brief period of her own absence had somehow brought it forward from the stage of wholly indefinite promise, where that of Constance yet remained, to the flawless grace and exquisite color of the rapidly unfolding bud. Estelle considered, and was wont to proclaim herself a great connoisseur in ladies' looks. "I love beauty everywhere," she used fervently to say, "but in the young of my own sex I adore it." She was, in truth, a most indulgent critic, and might almost have adopted as a motto that rollicking stanza of Abraham Cowley: -

"I never yet did see the face,
That had no charms for me;
From fourteen years to forty's space
They all victorious be!"

In the case of the little Curwens she had made rather a show, at first, of withholding her judgment. "I don't see, you know, Jane," she would take occasion anxiously to remark when Amory was out of the way, "how they can have the beauty of race; because, though their name is good enough, you all say that they both favor their mother, and her birth was unquestionably obscure. Now Jane, don't say Rubbish! It never seems to me quite a ladylike repartee."

As it happened, the beauty of race, that is to say the corporeal refinement, and general air of distinction which usually receive that name, was precisely what both girls possessed from the beginning; and dazzled by the sudden development in Ruth of other charms to correspond, Miss Ingestre confessed herself quite vanquished, and proceeded to fix her volatile affections, for the time being, in a very special manner upon Amory's elder ward. In a genuine affair of the heart like this, however, she must needs be more or less intrigante; and she therefore sedulously concealed from Mrs. Rothery the increasing fervor of her interest, but lay in wait for the object of it, all the more, with every species of tender wile.

She went regularly each morning, while the girls were at their studies, and Mrs. Rothery at her account-books, and sat for two hours at the bedside of Mrs. Forney, who, though fatally stricken, was rallying as Estelle had foreseen she might, and was no longer in immediate danger. Miss Ingestre's petted ponies were rusticating in remote inland pastures, and Jane kept only one scrubby little beast for her own driving, besides the saddle-horses just purchased for the sisters. So the heiress had been fain to order an equipage for her daily drives from a livery stable in the adjoining town; and the first time she found waiting for her at Mrs. Rothery's door the vast and shabby landau, gaunt pair, and bucolic coachman from Pratt's, she uttered a cry of dismay, and declared that she positively could not drive ten miles, all alone in so big and dreadful a vehicle, and entreated Jane with clasped hands that Ruth, whom the fresh air would certainly benefit, might be permitted to accompany her.

The girl gave a wistful look at the cerulean sea, and the long curve of the shining shore, lying fair in the September sunshine; but when Mrs. Rothery had firmly declined the invitation on her behalf, averring that the long rides which the girls now enjoyed every afternoon gave them quite enough outdoor exercise, she yielded with a submissive grace, which only added intensity to the romantic ardor of Estelle's new devotion. That very evening, having passed the hours while the sisters were out with an old-fashioned novel, on a couch in Amory's sitting-room, the amiable plotter opened her door no more than a crack, on hearing the soft step of Ruth in the passage outside, and said in a dulcet undertone,—

"Oh, there you are at last, my dear girl. Won't you please come in and help me?"

Ruth mastered her reluctance at this appeal, and crossed without delay the threshold of the charmed, sorrowful chamber. She was met by its new occupant, in a white *peignoir* gushing with forget-menot ribbons, the disheveled condition of her short curly locks giving her more than ever the aspect of a stout waxen doll.

"Ah, this is nice of you," she continued. "Now I know you won't refuse to lend me a hand in this emergency;" and she shook her mother-of-pearl hair-brush with a gesture of well-feigned despair.

"Anything I can do, dear Miss Ingestre" -

"Exactly, love. So like your sweet disposition! It was all very well," Estelle went on, transferring the brush to the hands of the astonished Ruth, "so long as we were quite by ourselves—I mean the rough, harum-scarum sort of hair-dressing which is all I can compass by myself. But now that there are two guests" (two distinguished members of the Sanitary Commission were to dine with Mrs. Rothery that evening), "I must be a little more comme-il-faut. And you have such extraordinary skill in arranging your own hair, dearest, that I knew you could and would—set my poor little yellow locks right in a twinkling."

"I!" cried Ruth, dismayed. "I would gladly, but indeed I cannot. It must be Connie you mean. She is the clever one. Please excuse me if I seem rude, but they all know that I have no skill in such things."

"On the contrary, child, you are a perfect adept. If an unconscious adept, it's all the more remarkable. That is genius. But do you really mean to tell me that you never sat down and studied out that faultless coiffure of yours?"

"Oh, Miss Ingestre, it is n't a coiffure at all. I find it very wearisome to have to manage my own hair,—it is really quite heavy, you know,—and so I do the easiest thing. I simply coil it around, and let it go."

"And angels," cried Miss Ingestre, rapturously regarding the classic outline of the small head, al-

ready considerably higher than her own, "could do no more! Our styles are as unlike as possible, still I thought that perhaps you would have known, by the same unerring instinct, just what would best suit me. But it does n't matter," she added with unaffected good-nature. "After all, dear, I get a great deal more pleasure out of seeing you beautiful, than I could from being so myself."

To her surprise Ruth's eyes filled suddenly with tears. "Please do not tell me I am beautiful." she said, "even if you think so. I fancy that I don't care for such things; but I might remember your kind flattery and think of it afterwards, and then it would do me harm."

"There's no flattery," rejoined Estelle stoutly; "and I don't see why there should be any harm. Beauty is a great gift, my love. Trust one who knows;" and she sank back into a low chair before the mirror, and drew Ruth down until she had the tall girl kneeling at her feet. "Nothing else in this world gives a woman so much power; and you're almost a woman now. She may or may not have learning, — it's the mode just now, and it's all very well — but if she have a face like yours "-

"Oh, please," Ruth interrupted, blushing deeply, and dismayed at having let fall two big briny drops upon Estelle's rich ribbon, "that is just what I am trying not to care for, - the having power, as you

call it, in this world at all."

Miss Ingestre quite forgot the part she had vaguely meant to play. She looked, as she felt,

very seriously impressed. "Oh, but how unusual," she murmured, "and I must say, how unnatural! to be planning for heaven at sixteen!"

"Is it so, I wonder?" The girl had instantly recognized the more genuine inflection, and felt encouraged thereby to go on dreamily, thinking her long hidden thoughts aloud. "I fancied there had always been those — in all Christian times, I mean — who had cared only for that from the very beginning, never making any mistake about this poor world at all."

"Are you sure," cried the elder lady, abruptly, electrified, as she ever felt herself to be, by one of her own transient flashes of common sense," that you ought to call the world poor until you know more about it, my dear?"

"Perhaps not" (with a certain exquisite humility), "but I seem to see very clearly that it can never fill my heart."

Estelle kissed her with her own blue orbs brimming. "I would n't for the world, my child," she said, just as seriously in earnest now as it was possible for her to be, and keeping a rueful eye on the reflection in the mirror of her own ample person, which struck her, for the first time perhaps, as rather flatly contradicting the notion of seriousness, "I would n't for the world interfere with any really pious impulse. The dedication so young of so perfectly beautiful a creature — Oh, pray excuse me, my dear child, I did n't mean to mention it. My own habits of mind are so vain! I only meant to

say that, though the notion of the prémices is charming — a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons — But even there, there was a pair, you know. Ah, me, I'm afraid I mix things sadly, but all I intended to say was that one ought, don't you think, to be very sure that it is really the preference for heaven that moves one, and not the despair of getting what one wants most on earth."

Ruth colored high.

"I would n't have ventured to say so much," Estelle hurried on with altogether genuine delicacy, "had n't it been for my own repeated experience. Oh, yes, my poor love! You think now it can only happen to you once; but it can, a great many times. I am older than you, my Ruth. Yes, I am. And I know it only too well! I even knew your guardian—don't mind my mentioning him; it is better that we should speak of him freely—when you were quite a tiny girl. What adds to my own grief about him now is—But there, I promised Mrs. Rothery I would n't speak of that. What I mean is that I perfectly appreciate your sorrow for him, and think it right that you should pray for him a good deal; but"—

"Miss Ingestre," said the girl, simply and brokenly, "I do pray for him, that is true; but more for myself that I may learn to live without him, and be quite willing that God's will should be

done about his ever coming back."

"Well, my sweet creature, I give it up. If you must be an angel — or perhaps it's a saint I mean

— before you're a woman, I suppose it's all right. After all, I understand you better than any of the rest of them, and sympathize with you more deeply."

"Yes, dear Miss Ingestre, I know that is true."

"And so we will be friend one another in this time of bereavement, n'est-ce-pas? and perhaps you will teach me to be a little less frivolous myself. At all events, you won't mind, now that the ice is broken, coming and sitting with me here sometimes, where the place is so pervaded by his spirit, and perhaps we can read good books aloud to one another, or something of that sort."

Ruth looked a little distant still, though Miss Ingestre had drawn her so close; but she smiled very sweetly.

"Oh, yes, thank you, I will come. I am really glad to have conquered my feeling about the room. I felt all the time that it was"—

"Funeste," interrupted Estelle. "I know that was what you meant to say. Well, we will baffle the Fates! I mean," she added hurriedly, "we will try to help one another to be good as if we were really of the same age, which I cannot help feeling that we are. For who is it says we should count time by heart-throbs? Only that would make me much older, would it not? Well, never mind, we will be friends, — dear friends. And I really need somebody to make serious things interesting to me just now, because there is that poor Mrs. Forney whom I see every day, and who is positively going

to die before long, and thinking a good deal about it, as I can see; and I do find myself so very much at a loss what to say to her sometimes — Hark! Do I hear an arrival? Good gracious! It wants only five minutes to dinner-time!"

"And I have n't helped you in the least about your hair-dressing, Miss Ingestre! Oh, what a useless creature I am!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Estelle, jauntily, "it's not of the slightest consequence. To tell you the truth, my angel, I never supposed you would help me. I merely wanted to win your confidence, and thank you for it, so much! Now go and dress yourself. I can twist up my unruly tresses in a twinkling, just as I do every day. After all, what do I care for her old Sanitary Commissioners? They are merely doing their best to encourage a gigantic wrong. But there, I promised not to speak of that. Run quickly, dearest, that she may not scold us both for being late. I shall wear old china blue; and you will put on that sweet plain little white silk, of course. I never thought Jane had any taste for herself, but I must say that with our poor dear friend's assistance she has usually provided exactly the right thing for you girls to wear."

Strange to say, the alliance thus formed prospered; and stranger yet, perhaps, its effect upon Ruth, was, upon the whole, cheering and salutary. All unconsciously, Miss Ingestre furnished the precocious girl with a touchstone wherewith she was

enabled to test the fallacy of some of her own more morbid and extravagant fancies, and for the rest, the disinterested sympathy and caressing tenderness of the odd little lady were sweeter than ever to her now that her daily life held so painful a void. Mrs. Rothery was vaguely jealous of the afternoon readings, and of certain other symptoms. which she divined rather than perceived, of a hushed and sacred species of sympathy. But she was herself more than ever absorbed in army work, and gratified to have secured all at once an enthusiastic little coadjutor in Constance, to whom it came as natural as rapt and prayerful resignation to her sister, to relieve her overcharged heart, after her guardian's departure, by stitching and canvassing for the "dear soldiers."

Meanwhile Amory's letters began to arrive; and they were charming, — very graphic in their pictures of camp life, as well as luminous and able in their discussion of the situation, serious enough in tone at times, but often exceedingly droll. They were all the more delightful to the reader, in that the writer was so possessed by the strangeness of his surroundings as to be, for the first time in his life, perfectly delivered from all consciousness of his own style. Even Jane Rothery remarked that while Amory had been trifling with his pen for a dozen years or more, he never seemed fairly to have learned the proper use of it till now. Immediate anxiety on behalf of the absentee was allayed by the fact that his regiment was presently ordered

to a post almost as remote as possible from the scene of actual hostilities. Later he received a staff appointment, concerning which Miss Ingestre observed that it seemed a shade more respectable than the position he had previously held, while Jane replied that there was n't much glory, at all events, in what he had gotten so easily, and chiefly, doubtless, through his good looks.

CHAPTER X.

ONE day, early in the November of that year, Judge Ford sat in a small private parlor of the Bath Hotel, Piccadilly, and regarded his surroundings with a species of wrathful disgust. He had writing materials before him on the massive square mahogany table where his solitary meals were served him by a sardonic waiter; and the said table was so much too large for the room that the space allotted to the waiter's promenade about the board was as that of a cloister walk to the enclosed quadrangle.

"Dear Walls," the judge had written, "I am sitting at a London fireside; but Heaven forbid that I should call the contents of my grate a fire"— Here he paused to survey the said contents, which consisted of one enormous cube of dead black coal, which gave no symptom of combustion, save by the slow creeping along its sides of sundry streams of thick, unwholesome-looking yellow smoke. While the good man held his pen suspended, that section of the outside atmosphere which was visible between the parted halves of his heavy red window curtains turned suddenly ten shades darker than it had been before. From a sickly ochre it became a deep olive brown, and

writing without artificial light was now impossible. The judge arose, muttering a naughty word, and stumbled to the bell-pull; then seized the poker with both hands, and commenced an attack upon his cube of coal in the style of one who essays the felling of a mighty oak in a primeval forest. He was rewarded for his exertions by seeing an angry, but sufficiently brilliant little blaze leap out of a rift in the coal; and when the servant had appeared, and lighted five gas-jets in the so-called chandelier suspended above the spacious table, he was able to resume his letter.

"The fact is, man," he went on, "I find, somewhat to my own chagrin, that I fairly loathe this motherland of ours, and all the inhabitants thereof. There's a moral coarseness about the best, and a mental density about the cleverest of them, which passes my powers of expression. I have yet to meet a man among those who claim to be wellbred and well-read who is n't a rank Southern sympathizer, and who does not regard the triumph of the Confederacy as a foregone conclusion. I've been treated to more blatant nonsense about 'chivalry' here, than even the United States Senate ever listened to; but if you pin these fellows down, and demand a reason for the selfish and sentimental faith that is in them, they turn mute as the fishes whom numbers of their aristocrats do so strikingly resemble in profile. Sometimes they inform me, with evident intent to annoy, that their lower classes pretty generally side with the North. Unfortunate lower classes!

"'Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,'

where it does n't make the difference of a doit which side the lower classes are on. However, there's one argument — and I believe only one — to which the whole British nation is accessible, and that is a sound licking, whether witnessed or received. When we have fairly beaten the breath out of the Confederacy, these 'foes of our own household,' will shut up with a glorious unanimity; and may a just Heaven assist our own stout hearts to hasten the day!

"Well now, I have blown my blast, and a certain portion of my spleen may fairly be set down, I suppose, to this infernal London weather. But the long and short of it is, I can do no good and get no good here, and I am going to turn square about and go home. If I have got to die soon, I prefer to die there at my post; but I have been led by the very exasperating nature of my experience on this side, to reconsider the matter of dying. I want to live to see their politics confounded and their knavish tricks frustrated, and (By G-!) I will! Seems to me I rated you rather when I first heard of your enlistment, not so very long ago. Well, I take it all back. 'Old men for counsel' (and I'm going back by the Soracte on the 20th charged with a precious lot of it), 'and young men for war.' I feel fully equal now to supporting the responsibilities which we are supposed to share, and more if necessary. You've heard of the man whose ordinary avoirdupois was one hundred and fifty, but who said that when he was mad he weighed a ton? — I had a pretty joint letter from the sisters the other day. Did you know — but of course you did — that your worthy sister has got that preposterous person, Miss Ingestre, in the house? Lively times there must be between the two! However, they will have gone to town by this time, and that will have broken it up.

"I see, by the way, that you are ordered into winter quarters. That must be rather a bore, and why should n't you be taking notes for a history of this affair? It would be more in your literary line than daily drill; and every man of us has got to do whatever he best can, from this time forth, until the thing is settled.

"Write me in New York.

"I remain yours," etc.

In pursuance of the doughty resolve thus recorded, the judge landed again upon his native shore in the early part of December, 1862.

Dark enough was the aspect of public affairs at that moment; but the plucky septuagenarian seemed to have come back from his irritating experience in the old country, panoplied in perfect obstinacy, and braced by inextinguishable hope. He went the rounds of his more intimate acquaintances, not staying for them to wait on him, challenging the treasonable, shaming the despondent, and purifying the sad and heavy atmosphere by the thunder of his lusty patriotism. Friends of his own age

and brethren at the bar, who had shaken their heads ominously over his faltering step and sunken cheeks, when he left them three months before, were electrified by what seemed his miraculous restoration to the vigor, both physical and mental, of his most palmy days. To Amory, who from force of inveterate habit, so often fell a-dreaming over his camp-fire in the void winter evenings, there was a ring like that of a clarion in the succinct and pithy letters of his old friend, — a note which helped more than anything else to brace our amateur warrior to a steadfast endurance of that ennui of inaction which was worse to encounter, or so he fancied, than the swift horrors of the hottest fray.

When he had gathered up the slackened threads of his ordinary labors and pursuits, and defined anew, as has been said, and with startling emphasis, his political position, Judge Ford wrote to Mrs. Rothery that he would give himself the pleasure of eating his Christmas dinner with her and with his wards in Boston, and that he would be with them on the eve of the festival.

The weather was bad even for that inclement season; a heavy snow-storm delayed the New York train, which ought to have arrived before nightfall, so that it was late when the judge floundered up the obstructed door-steps, and was admitted, in answer to a resounding bell-peal, into the peculiarly bright and cozy interior of the Butternut Street house. Even Mrs. Rothery came out into the hall

to welcome him, and to congratulate him, as warmly as in her lay, on the unexpected vigor with which he had braved the storm, while Constance, in her crimson winter frock, still made in simple, schoolgirl fashion, and with the long plaits of her dark hair streaming behind her, came flying down the stairway, and flung her arms about his neck, — just failing to strangle him, as he averred, but bringing tender tears into his brave old eyes by the childish fervor of her greeting.

When he had divested himself of his outermost wrappings, and had consented to be led for a few moments to the drawing-room fire, in order, as he expressed it, to "thaw out" a little before visiting his room, he inquired of Constance, who still clung rapturously to his hand, where her sister was.

"Ruth," said Mrs. Rothery, rather dryly, "is gone to church."

"Eh, what? Oh, yes, of course! Christmas Eve,—good girl! But I say, madam, do you know what sort of a night it is?"

"Miss Ingestre took her in the carriage," Constance explained eagerly; "and it's only a little bit of a way."

"Miss Ingestre? Oh! Is she here yet?"

"My friend Estelle is in her own house; and her extraordinary interest in the girls continues unabated. Quite lately," Jane added grimly, "she has become decidedly devout."

"She and Ruthie think almost exactly alike about serious things," put in the irrepressible Con-

stance.

"As Constance observes, their religious sentiments and practices are much upon a par. I do not consider that I have any right to interfere"—

"Well, no, madam, I don't suppose, strictly speaking, anybody has. These are times when those of us are happiest, upon the whole, who have a bit of religion to hang on by. Still it had better, no doubt, be a good working sort. And your friend, Mrs. Rothery, always struck me as a little fanciful and flighty."

"She is all that," Jane made haste to admit, as though positively apprehensive that through her own inveterate and seemingly inconsistent intimacy with Estelle, some such vain intimation might come to attach even to herself, "and Constance knows perfectly well already, that her present frivolous and expensive pieties are not at all to my taste. She is herself too old, perhaps, to get any positive harm from them; but at Ruth's susceptible age and with her romantic disposition"—

"Well, well, we shall see!" After all, the judge did n't choose to be entrapped into any declaration of religious, and even less of irreligious, intolerance; and when he had dressed and dined, and returned to the drawing-room, and late in the evening the door opened to admit Ruth herself, looking delicate as a flower amid her sealskin, but with colors glowing from the contact of the sharp air, and a visible trace in her clear eyes of that rapt expression which always added so strangely to their beauty, he felt himself quite subjugated, and

as if all his rusty chivalry were summoned to defend this innocent girl in the pious ways of her early choice.

There was, in fact, about her bearing on that Christmas Eve, a composed gladness, a staid and serious grace, beyond her sixteen years, perhaps, but infinitely becoming, which touched the lawyer's heart, curiously tender from the shocks of the last year, with something very like awe. He asked her to sing to him, before they parted for the night; and Ruth, without so much as inquiring what he would have, selected a very quaint and simple hymn for the Nativity, being, in fact, a translation and adaptation of her own of a portion of the Jesu, redemptor omnium, and called upon Constance to lend her alto with a certain gentle authority.

Jane trotted her foot impatiently, and clicked, with more than necessary noise, the needles from which depended her perpetual soldier's sock, so sanctimonious and theatrical did she judge the whole performance, while her guest wiped his eyes undisguisedly, and thanked the sisters, when it was concluded, in fairly broken tones.

He had it in his mind then to accompany Ruth to church the next day, "candles and all," as he said vaguely to himself; but the storm increased in the night, and raged with such fury until noon as to keep them all prisoners. Later in the day the heavens lightened, and the early sunset was ruddy and clear; and although, by reason of the holiday, the army of laborers, who assembled, before

the last flakes had fallen, to quarry and take away in huge blocks the dazzling snow, was less numerous than usual, yet the dauntless Miss Ingestre was able to present herself, in her grandest tenue, for the holiday dinner; and the occasion, in spite of Amory's absence, was a merry one.

"She's a fool," the judge wrote to his colleague a few days later, — and it need scarcely be observed that it was not Mrs. Rothery he meant, — "but she's a monstrous entertaining woman, and our wards are what the vulgar youth of the day call 'stunning.'" If the truth must be told, the solitary old gentleman found himself marvelously flattered and diverted by the fourfold femininity of the home circle into which he was received so warmly, and by which he found himself so variously honored and consulted during that visit; and he made it in his way to repeat the expedition several times in the course of the ensuing twelvemonth.

Save for the grave public events which marked its course, the year was not an exciting one, and brought no visible change in the relations of our friends. Amory's experience of active service, during that season of tremendous crisis, was confined to an unimportant skirmish or two, in which he received not a scratch; and his general health, he averred, had never been half so vigorous. Gradually, though of this he said barely a word in his letters, he found a place to fill in the strange microcosm of an army camp, a little work of his own to do among the rough and illiterate, the homesick

and suffering. He came to rank among his comrades, and especially among his subordinates, as a singularly helpful and jolly fellow, and all, as it seemed to him, through the hitherto unnecessary abundance of his intellectual resources. As his frame hardened, and his mental vision was cleared by an enforced contact with the homeliest of realities, he found it more and more difficult to understand his own identity with that dandified dreamer, tasting without appetite the cream of a select society, and making the most of an invisible wound, whom he beheld in the retrospect with a mixture of pity and contempt. At the same time, he was relieved of all possible compunction on the score of a seeming indifference to the responsibilities which had lately fallen upon him, by the restoration to health and return to his own hastily abandoned post, of his elder associate. In May of 1863 Amory's regiment was ordered to the front, he was himself relieved from staff-duty, and given the command of a company; a change he welcomed. He seemed to support more easily than many seemingly sturdier men, the fatigues of a three days' march in the burning weather of the Southern spring, and was only just weary enough, on the first night in his new quarters, to find a singular luxury in losing himself in the contents of the letters which awaited him. There was a much longer one than usual in Ruth's quaint, delicate, and early-formed handwriting, which professed to speak for the two sisters, although comically annotated in

various parts by Constance. It related how Judge Ford had taken them for a week to New Hampshire; and they had had the most delightful trip. ("Mrs. Rothery had to let us go when he asked it," put in Constance on the margin.) Their train had been stopped by a snow-storm on May Day, and they had passed the night in the queerest little out-of-the-way village, but had arrived all right the next morning, and had paid a visit to Hannah Shippen. And Shippie was now to move into dear mamma's old home, where she wanted them to visit her again in the summer, in raspberry time. ("And there are heaps everywhere," inserted the artless commentator, "all along the lovely waysides, and pastures full of them and of blackberries, and we may go, may n't we? Just you say so now, Guardian, and there will be no fuss.") Afterwards they had paid a visit to Judge Ford's own native town, about thirty miles further north, and had driven five hours on the top of a stage-coach, through the most glorious mountain valley, which Ruth would never, never forget. And the dear old judge had made a noble war-speech in the town hall in the evening, and had been received with great enthusiasm, and people appeared very proud of him. ("And where do you think we sat that evening, Ruth and I?" put in Constance. "Really, she leaves out half the fun. We sat upon the platform, if you please, with the minister's wife, and the doctor's daughters, and Mrs. Somebody whose husband owns the saw-mills, and among all the

great ladies of the place. Ruth and the ladies cried a good deal; but I never shed a tear, I promise you, but only clapped my hands at the loud and fiery places in the speech, just like the farmers on the floor"—

Amory laughed at the picture thus presented to his mind, and was glad to think that the sisters would learn in his absence to know and love the home of their mother's childhood. He had reproached himself sometimes, in his capacity of trustee, for letting even so insignificant a piece of property fall into neglect, but had never been able to summon courage to visit the place. Now he wrote, warmly approving the tenancy of Hannah Shippen; and expressing his conviction that six weeks with her of bracing breezes and country fare would be the best possible tonic for Ruth and Constance later in the year.

Once, again, however, the long projected ville-giatura was prevented, for, of all people in the world, it was Mrs. Rothery who in the beginning of August succumbed to the effects of her really heroic exertions for the Soldiers' Aid, and fell ill of a slow, nervous fever. A most impatient and impracticable invalid she was, defiant of doctors, and a terror to hireling attendants. But before she had been many days ill, a new power made itself gently felt in the headless household. Quietly and efficiently, as though she had been born for this, and had merely bided until now her true opportunity, Ruth came forward and assumed the position of

responsible nurse. Of the two, Jane would much have preferred having Constance about her, but the child was demonstrative and hurried, and heedless, like any other child, in fact; while Ruth, when her dainty and exact arrangements were complete, was content perfectly to efface herself, and avoided with really wonderful tact anything which might have tended to quicken the only half-slumbering aversion of her patient.

The doctor was emphatic in his praise of Ruth's management, and scouted the notion that her own health was likely to suffer from the nature of her

new duties.

"You may just dismiss that notion, Mrs. Rothery," he said. "Miss Curwen looks better and more alert than I have ever seen her. Amateur nursing is the universal craze just now, but this is the only luxuriously-brought-up girl I have ever seen who seems to me to have a positive vocation for it."

"You'll at least oblige me by not using that word before her," said Mrs. Rothery shortly, and

submitted to being made comfortable.

Daily bulletins of her condition were sent to Miss Ingestre, who had actually remained in town all summer long, for the sake of being near Mrs. Forney, now in very truth close to the end of her protracted sufferings. Estelle felt, and feelingly said in many a little perfumed note to Ruth, that it seemed as if the peculiar tie between them must if possible be strengthened by the strange similar-

know," she added on one occasion, with a naïveté all her own, "I do not think that until very lately Mrs. Forney has really loved me much more heartily than Mrs. Rothery loves you, my sweet girl. But I have been able to set her poor heart at rest about one or two things. She knows now how my views have altered, and that she will have no occasion to be jealous of me in the other world, and she does justice at last to my real devotion. And I would not have believed" — Estelle had scribbled on, mingling real feeling with fictitious, as only Estelle could — "that I could ever bear even to see any one suffer as she does; and God knows how I could endure it if the like were to come to me."

It was full autumn, and the martyr had been for weeks at rest, and Mrs. Rothery's convalescence was sufficiently advanced to admit of her fingers being once more very busy, when Miss Ingestre, whose own seaside home had been let for the season, arrived at the cottage to repeat the visit of the previous year.

"So you don't wear mourning for Mrs. Forney," remarked Jane, surveying the fresh and fashionable robes, which, as usual, vied in color with the sea and sky.

"Certainly not! Why should I? My mission to that household is fulfilled. I paid the last bills for the funeral yesterday, for I would have it handsome, and I've lent Horatio the money to go to the Riviera and recruit, as he calls it, though he is not

I intend him to pay me interest. It's not a very profitable investment, I dare say; but when I heard him proposing to go to the seat of war as an army chaplain, I felt that anything would be better than that he should be filling the minds of our poor, ignorant soldiers with his own grievous errors. And to think that I once fancied him a holy man! Has Ruth told you, Jane? I am going to be confirmed next month at St. Peter's-on-the-Bay. To think that, though my parents were Church people, it was never done before! But then, you know, I was so early left quite sadly to my own guidance."

"Early, was it? Well, 'early' is a relative term; and I never, as you know, had any particular respect for Dr. Forney. Of all possible positions, that of a dissenting divine of his latitudinarian school always appeared to me the most untenable. But he must feel as though the wheel of fortune took a direful turn for him when you caught the High Church distemper!"

CHAPTER XI.

There was a week in the ensuing spring — that of 1864 — during which our friends lived, so to speak, with suspended breath, compelled to follow hour by hour the heart-sickening intelligence from the seat of war which filled the columns of the

daily press.

Amory's regiment was now in the centre of the hottest action, and it seemed impossible but that sooner or later his name should appear on one of the dread lists of killed, wounded, and missing. Mrs. Rothery professed to keep her eye fixed on the now irresistible progress of the Union cause, and the plainly foreshadowed end of the Great Rebellion. Estelle, whose half-dormant sympathy with the Confederate side had been rekindled by the Emancipation Proclamation, volubly and incessantly denounced what she called the "ruthless barbarity" of the campaign, and made rather a merit of giving Amory up for lost. She kept a couple of boxes and an elaborate dressing-bag ready packed with a most miscellaneous assortment of restoratives and finery; and imparted to Ruth her intention of starting instantly for the seat of "this infamous war," should it appear that Amory was in a condition to require nursing.

"You will see that I shall be beforehand with her," she said, meaning of course Mrs. Rothery. "She has always so much business on hand that she would require a few hours at least to make arrangements, and in that time I shall be off—Would that I could take you with me! But, O my sweetest dove!" bursting into sudden tears and hugging Ruth fervently, "perhaps, — perhaps, after all, — there will be no need to go!"

Nothing could have shown more plainly the change that had already been wrought in Ruth than her self-command during that week of tense anxiety. She grew very pale and visibly thinner, - Mrs. Rothery suspected her of intentionally fasting; but she made no audible moan, and even imposed a certain check on the tearful importunities of Constance, and the treasonable transports and inconsequent lamentations of Estelle. And after all, relief at least from personal anxiety was once more in store for them. The tale of the seven days' slaughter was at last all told. Mourning robes and closed windows were to be seen on all sides, and the sound seemed always in the air of muffled drums and funeral dirges; but their soldier seemed to bear a charmed life, and the upshot of it all for him was a promotion to be major. His letters, though frequent, were very brief now, and altogether matter-of-fact in tone. He could not expatiate on what he had seen and suffered; and he disposed, kindly of course, but almost curtly, of the hope which Constance expressed, that he would have a furlough and come home to them in the summer.

Meanwhile they all flitted once more to the seaside, where their little circle was enlarged this year by two very agreeable additions. The most pretentious of the residences which dotted that strip of coast had long been a trial to Mrs. Rothery in the varying fortune it had sustained. Now it had stood vacant with weedy lawn and boarded windows, and again it would be hired for the season by some undesirable tenant. Instability was always a source of vexation to her, and she would have been relieved at any time to hear that the property in question was sold. But she was decidedly gratified when Judge Ford informed her, during a flying visit which he paid them late in April, that the estate had been purchased by one of his own oldest and most valued friends.

Stanton St. John was his rather stately appellation, and Mrs. Rothery knew the name very well, and that the elderly gentleman who bore it was of excellent lineage and large possessions. When, therefore, they were all established upon the shore, and formal courtesies had been exchanged with the least possible loss of time, an acquaintance sprang up which ripened into intimacy with rural speed. Mr. St. John, upon his part, had been accurately instructed by his friend in the peculiar circumstances, and close accidental relation to himself of the inmates of the cottage; and it soon became apparent that the new-comer had at least no intent to dis-

courage the familiar intercourse of his own grandson with those two comely creatures, and probably also most desirable matches, — the girls in Mrs.

Rothery's charge.

For the family which came to take possession of the rejuvenated and re-decorated villa consisted solely of two men, each bearing the sounding name of Stanton St. John. When Judge Ford rallied his old crony on the unnecessary size of his habitation, the latter replied seriously, "I prefer to have space about me, — handsome, unencumbered space."

Whereat the judge chuckled. He had found much amusement, first and last, in the contrast between the imposing exterior, and the impressible

heart of this man.

Constance drew a long sigh when the Stanton St. Johns, senior and junior, had left after their first call. "What a miserable time that boy must have!" she observed.

"Oh no, I don't think it! I admired the old

gentleman very much," was Ruth's rejoinder.

"For my part," said Miss Ingestre, who had chanced to be present, "I agree with you both. The grand manner is going out so fast that one feels inclined to pay it a sort of homage, but it must be heavy at the fireside, and rather hard on an only child."

"I object to the fashion of discussing people the moment they disappear," said Mrs. Rothery. "Let it end," which for the moment it did, but only to be resumed, of course, when the restraint of her presence was removed. The final judgment of all the four was, however, decidedly favorable, and the two men became almost daily visitors at Mrs. Rothery's cottage.

The elder was tall and erect, spare in figure and keen of sight; his gray hair, now growing thin, was carefully disposed, and his side-whiskers always accurately trimmed. His external precision and punctilio were extreme, but it seemed doubtful whether he would ever be able to shape the manners of his grandson after his own classic model. That artless youth stood in wholesome awe of his grandfather, while yet he was genuinely proud and fond of him; but then Stanton St. John, Jr., was a being who after two years at Harvard remained strikingly simple - minded. He was sturdily built, dark in coloring, and with features rather pleasingly balanced than handsome. He was averse to mental exertion; and his prosperous, healthy life had made him optimistic as regards the general outcome of human affairs. He never gave any individual the benefit of the doubt, for doubts he had none. The majority of the human race, male and female, he considered "good fellows," and heartily liked; some few he regarded as prone to all evil, and capable, as occasion might offer, of the most sinister designs. Mrs. Rothery had the honor of being early elected a member of this distinguished minority.

"I hope you don't mind my saying — she's no real relation of yours, so I don't see why you should,

— that I don't think she'd stick at anything." This observation was addressed to Constance, and may be held to indicate the rapid strides by which their acquaintance had advanced. "I shake in my shoes whenever she looks hard at me," the collegian went on. "What she decides upon, a fellow must do. Oh, she's a regular nether millstone, she is!"—which was a long and subtle analysis of character for Stanton St. John, Jr.

It was a good number of weeks after his advent at the seaside that he had achieved it, for at the outset he had worshiped at the shrine of Ruth's distant and dreamy beauty. Receiving, however, only the gentlest and most remote recognition in that quarter, he soon found his devotion pall, and turned his attention to the younger sister, with whom he presently struck up a great alliance. Constance lectured him unflaggingly on his short-comings both as a student and a future citizen, and he found her strictures for the most part highly amusing. When they ceased to be so, he would endeavor, usually with ready success, to turn the conversation. One July afternoon he did it in this wise:—

- "Somebody's come to live at the mill."
- "What mill?" inquired Constance severely.
 "You don't appear to have been attending to what I said."
- "The one up the river," and he flung a pebble in the direction of the tidal inlet commonly so called. The two had retired, as far as the limits

of the veranda would permit, from the vehement political discussion raging at the other end thereof between Mrs. Rothery, Miss Ingestre, and the elder St. John, of which only disjointed fragments, and especially the gentleman's frequent and elaborate "To a lady, madam," came distinctly to their ears. Midway between the two parties sat Ruth in a low chair, completely absorbed in one of her first attempts at ecclesiastical embroidery; while Constance and Stanton had planted themselves on the veranda steps.

On the present occasion the young lady had been urging upon her companion the duty of enlistment in the Union army; and he, not seeing his way clear to immediate self-sacrifice, had cast about him rather desperately for a piece of news. His bait took instantly.

- "Really? That mill? Then perhaps they will see the ghost." For the precincts of the long-deserted mill in question were said to receive occasional nocturnal visits from the wraith of a poor woman who had been drowned, possibly with her husband's assistance, in the weir.
- "It is n't they; it's he. It's a photographer. I asked him about the ghost; and he said he had n't seen or heard anything uncanny, but he and his boy sleep on the other side of the house."
 - "How came you to see him?"
 - "He's been doing our rooms."
- "Oh, I thought you meant the ordinary kind of photographer. Why did n't you explain?"

"Hello! There he is now!"

A stranger had appeared on the scene. He advanced towards Mrs. Rothery, and made an unnecessarily elaborate bow. "I have lately come into this neighborhood," he began fluently, "and I am prepared to take views of grounds and mansions, external and internal. I have some specimens here which will give you an idea of my style and execution;" and he drew from his pocket a folding case of photographs which he swung open. "Now that, though unfortunately a little faded, — we use better chemicals nowadays, — I call very successful as a group."

Mrs. Rothery, who had been listening mechanically, merely waiting for a convenient moment in which summarily to dismiss the intruder, found her attention unexpectedly arrested. Here before her were the childish features of Ruth and Constance, framed picturesquely in luxuriant vines. Under whatever circumstances the man had acquired this likeness, he could not be allowed to retain it. But her self-possession never failed her, and her plan was formed before he had ended his voluble explanation. She expressed herself satisfied with the evidences of his skill, employed him to take one small view of the exterior of the cottage, and purchased the children's likenesses as a "pretty, fancy picture," having learned, by a little seemingly careless questioning, under what circumstances it had been taken, and that the negative had not been preserved.

The photograph had escaped the notice of Mrs. Rothery's companions, who were still intent upon their argument; and she had intended to destroy it, but eventually, with a vague idea that it might some day interest Amory, she laid it away among some packages of receipted bills in an old dispatch-box, where it was lost to sight, and for a time to memory as well.

If the photographer had recognized the originals of his group, he had tact enough not to betray the fact; and having acquired a certain prestige through the St. John and Rothery patronage, he obtained much employment in the whole neighborhood.

Miss Ingestre, in particular, had her parlors and veranda reproduced under innumerable aspects, or, to speak more strictly, her own figure variously disposed amid their luxurious details. The universal prevalence of one hue, both in costume and furniture, and that one the despair of the photographer, rendered these views but moderately successful, and very pallid images, both literally and figuratively, of the bounteous original. But, such as they were, she had copies of them struck off by the dozen, and forwarded to her friends all over the country in packages tied up with azure ribbons.

A fortnight or so after the rage for photography set in, Mrs. Rothery received a second shock. The valuable man-servant, whom she had acquired on Amory's departure, had fallen ill just before the family left town, and his hastily accepted successor

was found by the maids, on their descent one morning, lying in an inebriate stupor beside the winecloset, the contents whereof were found materially to have diminished during his brief stay. Naturally the man performed no more duties in that dwelling; and Mrs. Rothery examined into the "characters" of all applicants for his position with a thoroughness which kept it vacant many weeks.

It was during this interregnum that Miss Ingestre arrived at the cottage one morning in a state of breathless excitement; and, summoning Mrs. Rothery from her morning duties, begged to be taken into some retreat where the sisters could not possibly overhear her communication.

"Suppose we stay where we are," said Mrs. Rothery calmly. (They were on the broad front veranda.) "There could hardly be a better place. The schoolroom, as you know, is at the back of the house."

"But might they not come out?"

"They never come out during their study-time. Now what is it?"

"It is terrible! and I cannot but feel, Jane, that it is one more result of your exceeding severity."

"Pray be a little more explicit."

Miss Ingestre drew off her gloves, and solemnly stretched out her dimpled hands. "Look!" she demanded.

"Well?" said Mrs. Rothery, when she had complied.

Estelle gave an impatient sigh. "Don't you see the difference? My rings are gone."

Now such an incessant twinkle and flash still followed all her gestures, that a casual observer might well have been excused for not perceiving any lack of jewelry. Mrs. Rothery gave a second glance. "You have come here this morning, Estelle, for the purpose of letting me know that you have decided to wear ten rings instead of twenty! Really, I think you might have waited till afternoon!"

"These are not ornaments to me; these are mementos!" observed Miss Ingestre, with a wave of the hand which set the jewels flashing with intenser light. "They are memories; and they never leave my fingers. This Dr. Forney gave me years ago, and that opal poor Tom Elsmere left me in his will; and that topaz—"yellow's forsworn, you know—was Amory's own gift"— Estelle gave a plaintive roll to her eyes, and her exasperated listener interrupted:—

"Never mind the history of your trinkets! But if there is really anything to be told, say it and

go, for I am very busy."

"These, as I told you, I wear by night as well as by day; but the others are left in a tray on my dressing-table, and this morning they were gone,—stolen, of course."

"Nonsense! you put them somewhere else."

"My dear Jane, there was nowhere else to put them! Besides, Fifine distinctly remembers seeing them there last night."

"Did you miss anything else?"

" No."

"Then, depend upon it, you have only mislaid those."

Miss Ingestre was grieved almost to tears. "But I tell you the rings are gone. And everything else was in the safe; and there were three burnt matches on the stairs, and two in the upper hall! How can you be so unfeeling when the fault is all yours?"

"Are you demented, Estelle, or what do you mean?"

"Why, if you had not dismissed that poor man so harshly, he would n't have been driven to theft for subsistence."

"So you are pleased to fancy that my late butler is accountable for your mislaid jewels."

"Who else is so probable, or rather who else is probable at all, Jane? The motive is what we should search for when a crime has been committed, and here it is a palpable one. We have a man who feels himself injured by a certain person, — yourself, my dear. What more natural"—

"Now, Estelle, before you elaborate your theory farther, I advise you to go back and see if your rings have n't rolled into some corner. Positively I cannot spend any more time discussing the matter this morning. You must excuse me." And Mrs. Rothery left her helpless visitor, whose renewed search, meekly prosecuted under the compulsion of the stronger will, failed to discover any of the missing treasures.

The report of the supposed burglary, which "grew in moving," spread far and wide; and caused, so Mrs. Rothery maintained, not only the multiplication of bolts and bars in the entire range of seaside residences, but a rank crop of absurd tales of mysterious footprints discerned in the morning under too accessible windows, and marks upon outside locks indicating that they had been tampered with.

The two St. Johns and Constance upheld the skeptical theory; but Ruth seemed rather inclined to emulate the credulity and share the alarms of Miss Ingestre. She did not discuss the point, — she seldom discussed any point nowadays, — but contented herself with observing discreetly, when the others had exhausted their arguments, that after all she had an impression of something unexplained.

CHAPTER XII.

The mystery had not been solved when word was received by the elder St. John that Judge Ford would accept, for a few days, the standing invitation for the summer, which had been extended to him as soon as the villa was in order for guests. "We will lay the case of your lost jewels before him, madam," said Stanton St. John, Sen.; "and see what a renowned expert thinks of our dangers from the midnight robber, and our arrangements for defense."

On the day after his arrival, the judge presented himself at the cottage, accompanied by the younger St. John. He said he understood that there was a case to come before him, which he called taking a rather unfair advantage of his holiday, and he must at least waive the hearing of it until all the witnesses were present. He had come now for a game of croquet, and peremptorily summoned Ruth and Constance to accompany himself and Stanton to the lawn.

For the judge, drolly enough, was an ardent amateur, and an assiduous, though shockingly bad performer whenever occasion offered, at the light and blameless out-of-door pastime of those days, now long replaced by the more serious and robust lawn-tennis. When, therefore, he and Ruth had been swiftly and ignominiously beaten by Stanton and Constance, and he and Constance more slowly but none the less surely vanquished by Stanton and Ruth, he led the latter away with him, leaving the two young "professionals," as he called them, to fight it out alone.

A sharp duel ensued, in which Constance was victorious; but when Stanton demanded his revenge, she informed him teasingly that he would have to wait a little for that, and, ordering him to sit beside her on the rustic bench provided for spectators of the game, she began plying him with her usual bracing counsels, which she emphasized by frequent blows of her victorious mallet upon Mrs. Rothery's cherished turf. Her faithful thrusts were parried by the young man with his usual lumbering lightness.

"Why don't you try to distinguish yourself?"

"Could n't if I tried."

"Perhaps not." This with withering scorn.
"But even stupid men can do their duty."

"My duty is to take care of my grandfather."

"Your duty is to enlist. This war is one of those things for which cause a man shall leave"—

"Grandfather and grandmother, and cleave unto his bayonet, and they twain shall be one flesh wound." He laughed long and loud.

Constance regarded him with resolute disdain. "That is n't amusing; it's profane."

"You began it."

"I did nothing of the kind. Will you enlist?"

"No, I don't think I will."

"You 'll be drafted!"

"Oh!" (with an affected shudder.) "I hope not! I should be so frightened."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"It's constitutional."

"There's no such thing as a constitutional coward!" This was one of Mrs. Rothery's theories.

"All women are."

"I 'm not."

"Oh, come now!"

"I 'm not."

"You're afraid of ghosts!"

"Not in the least."

"You would n't go up to the mill after dark, and watch for the woman who 'walks.'"

"Indeed I would!"

"Come with me to-night, then."

"I would, only I don't see how it could be managed."

"I told you so."

"I'm not frightened!"

"Actions speak louder than" —

"Stop! I will go, then. Only you must plan it."

"That's easy enough," and he proceeded to unfold a project which delighted Constance by its romantic features and unexpected depth of strategy.

"Very well," she said, rising in high excitement, and depositing her mallet in the box with the air

of one who puts away childish things on the coming to hand of serious business. "You'll find me ready."

Not until the moment had nearly arrived for putting into execution the sapient scheme of Stanton St. John, Jr., did it occur to Constance that it would be absolutely necessary, in order to insure its success, to repose at least a partial confidence in Ruth. Fully to explain would be impossible; but not, so Constance thought, to capture from Ruth a half-conscious assent to her own temporary absence from the house. It was Ruth's regular habit to sit quite silent, for some little time before she went to rest, beside the window which was peculiarly her own, in the long chamber that the sisters continued to share. There were a good many devotional books piled in one corner of her small writing-table, but these were seldom opened at this quiet hour, during which Constance had learned to tread softly and keep a respectful distance, with an awed suspicion that her sister was engaged in the solemn and to her inexplicable act of "meditation."

To-night, however, she drew lightly near the motionless figure and said in a casual sort of way: "I'm not going to bed just yet, Ruthie. Don't lie awake for me. I shall be back presently. I'm just going out."

"Going out?" Ruth repeated the words quite mechanically, and with no trace of speculation at first in the beautiful, dilated eyes which she lifted to her sister's face. "Yes; for a little walk with Sta—Mr. St. John, — toward the mill. Au revoir, dearie!" and she turned quickly, hoping to escape before her sister's trance dissolved.

But Ruth, after all, was not quite bereft of her wits. "What, so late?" she exclaimed, rousing herself. "Stop a minute, Connie. Is the judge going, too?" But the sprite had already vanished.

The plan had been for Constance and Stanton to meet in the back shrubbery, and proceed in company to the mill, rather more than a mile distant, wait until midnight, if necessary, for the ghost, and then return to the shore.

Mrs. Rothery was an advocate of early hours during the summer. The sisters were verbally dismissed from the drawing-room at half past nine, and lights were expected to be extinguished in all the cottage about an hour later. The vigilant mistress of the house had her room upon the front, and now as Ruth sprang up to recall her sister she was only just in time to see her glide noiselessly down stairs, past one after another of the light portières which, fortunately for this adventurous design, Mrs. Rothery had been induced to substitute for doors, and through china closet and kitchen to the tradesmen's door. This stood open, and a man was at that moment passing over the threshold. "Stanton!" breathed Constance, and, all unconscious of her sister's presence, sped lightly after the vanishing form.

Thoroughly aroused now, and without pausing

even to take note of her own consternation, Ruth followed. The moon, over which a succession of fleecy clouds had been flying, was just now obscured, but there was enough light to show that the object of Constance's pursuit turned down the narrow path, bordered with high hemlock hedges, which led to the tradesmen's entrance from the high road.

Not daring to call for fear of detection, but never for an instant doubting who was in advance of her, Constance ran on down the path, till the moon once more shone out brightly, and revealed to her startled eyes who but Stanton St. John Jr., coming leisurely towards her. Who, then, was the man between them? She stopped abruptly, but she did not scream. The two men at the same instant perceived one another, and each expressed his surprise by a low-voiced exclamation.

"By Jove!" said Stanton St. John, Jr.

"The Devil!" said the other, and threw a glance over his shoulder by which Constance recognized him as the photographer.

At first it seemed as though he would force his way past her; to escape laterally, over or through the hedge, was manifestly impossible. But another figure, that of Ruth, was now dimly visible behind Constance; so he, too, came to a standstill. Stanton advanced and seized him valiantly by the collar. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I might say the same to you," retorted the photographer.

"I saw him come out of the house, and I thought it was you," said Constance in low-voiced excitement.

"You've been breaking into the cottage," pursued Stanton. "I'll have you arrested."

"I don't believe it!" By a quick wrench the photographer, who had been standing with what should have been suspicious quiet, tore himself out of the other's retaining grasp and was gone. When Stanton would have followed him, Constance clutched him by the arm, and burst into a flood of tears.

"What made you suggest such a horrid thing? Now we shall be found out, and I don't know what will become of me!"

"What do you mean?"

She stamped her foot impatiently. "What makes you so slow? When the man's arrested you'll have to tell how you found him, won't you? If you don't, he will."

Stanton St. John whistled. At this critical moment Ruth presented herself. "What is all this?" she demanded, rather authoritatively for her. "You'd much better give it up."

"Ruth!"

"Miss Curwen!" But even in the midst of their amazement and discomfiture, the two feckless young things laughed at the extreme obviousness of her suggestion.

"We thought we should give it up," said the young man quaintly; "you girls go back, and I'll

think it over," and he accompanied the sisters in silence to the cottage.

Arrived once more in the sanctuary of their own room, there was a whispered and somewhat sheepish confession on the part of Constance; and a little sage admonition on that of Ruth, delivered in the same tone; but no threat, nor even thought, of betraying the escapade to the merciless higher power. Only how came that man there? Had he really been in the house? Constance, to be sure, did not wrestle even with this problem very long, but Ruth lay sleepless, and quaked the remainder of the night away.

Stanton St. John, Jr., when he had watched the light forms of the sisters disappear, turned away, and attempted to find some solution to the present complication. He endeavored to neutralize his confessed slowness of mind by the rapid motion of his body, and covered the few rods which intervened between the cottage and his grandfather's dwelling at a rapid run, arriving there somewhat out of breath, but not a whit nearer a decision.

It happened that Judge Ford, who unlike Mrs. Rothery was an inveterate lover of late hours, beheld the boy tear through the shrubbery as he himself sat on the veranda, enjoying the moonlight, his cigar, and a solitary cogitation on Woman: Her Comparative Merits Now and Formerly. There is no need to say that he found the present generation below the level of his own contemporaries; and he was inclined to believe that "new-fangled notions"

about the training of girls were largely responsible for this falling off. His wards were of course both text and illustration in this inaudible discourse. The judge felt it a pity that there should be no one near to profit by his wisdom; and faute de mieux addressed himself to a mental image of Mrs. Rothery.

"You are quite wrong in your method, madam, quite wrong, I assure you. If you could mould those Curwen children to suit yourself, you would n't make attractive women out of them. You can't knead souls as you can dough. Even with dough you must make allowance for yeast; and I rather expect to see you considerably surprised one of these days."

It was at this point in his imaginary harangue that young St. John appeared in sight. He dashed up to the veranda before he noticed the judge; then he stopped and eyed the old man meditatively, cocking his head first on one side and then on the other.

His attitude tickled the lawyer. "Caught me sentimentalizing, you think, young man."

"No," said Stanton slowly, "I was wondering"— Then he paused.

"Whether I should tell your grandfather you were out so late. Well, I sha'n't."

The boy's rather heavy face was peculiarly open in its expression, and the possibility of anything disgraceful was negatived by one look at it. "The fact is, however," he owned naïvely, "that I am in rather a scrape, and I was wondering whether I would tell you."

Stanton had appeared, and in view of his previous meditations was a bit startled. Not on any account, however, would he check the boy's impulse to confidence. He was much relieved when, with a little encouragement, he had elicited a full statement of the case. Its rather silly, but perfectly innocent nature pleased him as a tribute to his own skill in physiognomy; and he was disposed to regard the whole affair lightly enough, especially as Stanton had interspersed his narrative with heartfelt aspirations that he "might never get caught in such a mess again;" but he utterly refused to take the photographer seriously.

"Constance probably imagined she saw him in the house, — nervous, excitable child, with her head all full of ghosts and spectres. You say Ruth did n't seem alarmed?"

"No," Stanton admitted, "but Ruth, you know, never sees what other people do. I fancy he was there. I don't know why he should have been just hanging round; and he was in the shrubbery, for I saw him."

"Oh, harsh are the judgments of youth!"

"Well, but I say, sir, ought n't I to inform some-body?"

"Oh, no. I rather think you'd only make yourself a butt, and get the girls into trouble. I've no doubt it's all Constance's imagination." Stanton shook his head. "I hate to do it, but I think I ought."

"Wait till morning, and see if anything is missing from the cottage."

"Then he'd have time to make off."

The judge rose to his feet. "Well, Stanton," said he, "suppose you and I stroll up towards the mill first and reconnoitre. If there's anything suspicious, maybe we shall see it. It's a pleasant, dry night, and I don't mind. At all events, there's the ghost, he appended with a smile.

So they proceeded thither, the judge making use of his opportunity to read his companion a little good-humored lecture, in which he tried, without quenching the lad's confidence, to provide against the recurrence of such escapades by describing them as childish freaks which Stanton should have outgrown.

The latter received his reproofs ingenuously, expressing contrition and promising amendment; and alleging nothing more heinous by way of motive than that Constance was such a "jolly little thing," and that Mrs. Rothery "had such a cut-and-dried way with her that it set a fellow on." As they approached the point where the mill first became visible, Stanton advised proceeding with extreme caution, and advanced slowly, lifting his feet unnaturally high, as though a noiseless fall could be no otherwise secured.

In another minute he seized the judge with one hand, and pointed triumphantly forward with the other. The part of the building inhabited by the photographer was brilliantly lighted, the rays from the window superimposing irregular yellow patches upon the white moonlight. They stole onward, the boy's eyes glistening, and his breath coming fast with excitement. Presently voices began to be audible, the tones of men who mingle expostulations with threats.

Stanton could restrain his eagerness no longer. He dashed forward to a point whence he could obtain a view through the low, uncurtained window. Here he stood, dancing up and down in his excitement, and wildly gesticulating to the judge to increase his pace, while his shadow, alternately flung forward by the moon, and backward by the streaming lamplight, seemed to dance back and forth over his own shoulder in an unearthly fashion,—the silhouette now dashing up to the very eaves of the house, and now rushing down upon the judge, as if to hurry him on.

As the latter came up, he perceived that these apparent gyrations, were due to the frequent passage between the lamp and the window of opaque masses of humanity, in one of which he presently recognized, to his amazement, the stalwart and perfectly familiar person of Robert Jones, of the New York police.

"Stanton, my boy, it seems you were right," he said in hasty acknowledgment, and pushed forward into the mill, closely followed by his more than willing companion.

They entered what had been the sitting-room of

the miller's family. There were some remnants of paper on its walls, and indications that the begrimed wood-work had once been painted white. A few battered articles of furniture left behind in the last flitting had been collected here, and supplemented by others procured in the town. The room and a large cupboard opening from it were encumbered with the results and appliances of photography, but these had retired into the background.

The interest of the scene gathered about the round pine centre-table. In two chairs, equally out of reach of that and one another, sat the photographer and his assistant, both in irons and guarded by policeman Smith, while policeman Jones, before mentioned, was ranging on the table a miscellaneous collection of bijouterie, received in instalments from a young man whom the judge greeted as Johnson.

The person thus addressed stopped, and saluted the judge in respectful astonishment.

"Here on business, I see," said the latter.

"Yes, Hinks you know," Mr. Johnson returned, with a wave at the prisoner, and proceeded to establish his identity by further particulars. "We've been looking for him in connection with the big Albany burglary for some time, and finally learned he'd set up as photographer here. We should n't have suspected he was pursuing his other profession as well, if he had n't had those in his pocket when he came back here to-night just in the nick of time for us."

The objects at which he pointed were a small silver statuette and a gold thimble. Stanton could restrain himself no longer. "There!" he cried to the judge, "don't you see? That 's Mrs. Rothery's Henry Fourth, and that 's Constance's thimble. And those are Miss Ingestre's rings."

Mr. Johnson turned sharply upon him. "So these things had been missed?"

"Stanton hesitated, and looked appealingly at Judge Ford, who came to his relief. "There were rumors afloat, but beside those rings, nothing of any great value has disappeared, so far as I know."

"Then you think we have all he's taken hereabouts. You know of no other losses?"

The judge shook his head.

"The person best informed declined to speak out, you see."

"So pig-headed, too, when he ain't likely to come this way again in a hurry," appended policeman Jones, virtuously directing his remarks at the prisoner, a compliment which the late photographer acknowledged by an expressive grimace.

A little later the judge and Stanton returned to the shore, the latter chattering volubly all the way. From that evening Judge Ford was Stanton's ideal; and the boy was regarded by the elderly man as a favorable specimen, upon the whole, of the degenerate youth of to-day.

Judge Ford's hours of sleep must have been few, for he arrived at the cottage in time to catch Constance before breakfast, and have a little serious talk. He began by reprimanding her for her imprudence the night before; then he made her promise not to do so again, and never to hesitate about coming to him in a difficulty. And finally he announced that, as he knew all about the matter, and as the project had never gone farther, he should not mention it himself to Mrs. Rothery; and advised Constance to take her choice between a spoken confession to that lady, and a written one to Amory, for which latter she immediately decided.

He then accompanied his penitent ward to breakfast, and informed the mistress of the house of the excursion Stanton and he had made to the mill the night before, and the curious discoveries which had awaited them there. What led their footsteps in that direction he did not say, and still less did he mention the hour of their opportune promenade.

So Miss Ingestre regained her beloved jewels, plus the pleasurable excitement of having to go and identify them in person, and she exulted not a little over Mrs. Rothery.

"Instinct is woman's province," she said with sweet triumph, "and I'm sure this proves that we should never abandon it for common sense. I always knew they were stolen."

"I should say," remarked Mrs. Rothery, "that the chief use of your 'instinct' in this affair had been to direct your suspicions, quite unjustly, as it appears, to my late butler. And I should also say, if you'll permit me, that, in my opinion, a bank vault is the best place for such of your precious rings as are not inseparable mementos."

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE bitterly cold and stormy night, in the middle of the ensuing winter, Ruth Curwen stole away from the bright drawing-room to a tiny upper chamber at the back of the Boston house, which, after long lying vacant, had of late been tacitly surrendered to her for her own private occupation.

She had reproved Constance, very gently, but still unmistakably, when that light-hearted young person spoke of the closet in question, with perhaps a shade of mockery, as Ruth's oratory.

"I would rather you did n't call it so, Con."

"Why not? Is n't that what Miss Ingestre calls the beautiful little place she has just had fitted up behind her dressing-room?"

"But this place is not fitted up."

"Still you do go there to say your prayers; and you can't deny it, Ruthie."

"And do you know," observed Constance, a little guiltily, to her now inseparable crony and confidant, Stanton St. John, Jr., who pursued his studies rather largely that winter in Butternut Street, "I'm almost glad she's taken up this fashion, for it did use to make me feel so wicked to wake in the night and see her at her complines and things in our own room."

"By Jove!" said the sympathetic Stanton; "I should think so!"

Yes, Ruth went away to her icy little sanctum to "say her prayers," having first conscientiously enfolded herself in an old, fur-lined traveling wrap. May we venture to examine a little further into the meaning of the phrase in the case of this ardent and innocent young creature, who had so early felt the solid earth shaken under her footsteps by the throes of fate, who had understood, so much better than her elders gave her credit for understanding, her mother's pitiful case; who had been led by the sum total of so many conflicting influences and motives, after an unusual fashion perhaps, but most sincerely, to concentrate her girlish efforts and aspirations on that which, in organized piety, it is customary to call detachment?

"Entbehren sollst Du, sollst entbehren." Not in the least in the bitter spirit of the rebellious anchorite, but rather with the docility of the consecrated child in the awesome old Bible story, answering bravely to the mysterious midnight summons, "Lord, here am I," did this delicate maiden accept, or fancy that she accepted, almost before she knew the significance of it, the fact that the dearest earthly desire of her heart could never be fulfilled.

The instinct was at first a very obscure one which warned her of something forbidden about the fond occupation of her thoughts and dreams with the kind, tender, fascinating friend whom her mother had summoned in her last hour, and into whose hands she had delivered her orphan children. He had been hers; and when with maturing years, and especially after the crisis brought about by Amory's abrupt departure for the war, the sudden question had pierced the soul of the daughter, "Had he been rightfully hers?" she had silenced the doubt as unfilial and horrible, but all the more profoundly in her own case had been made aware of a sovereign and irresistible summons to intercession and sacrifice. Her immaculate fancy, thus precluded, as she solemnly believed, from the fields in which it would have delighted to revel, began to build itself mansions in an unearthly country, with such materials as the elaborate and somewhat artificial religious observances to which she was accustomed brought ready to her hand. Whether or no this visionary sanctuary of the inexperienced girl resembled in aught any mystical pattern in the holy mount, any unseen and transcendent reality; now at nineteen, in the full sunrise of her exquisite young womanhood, it had become an ever-ready retreat for her spirit, a serene and familiar shelter. No such restful refuge from the stir and strife of actual existence is possible to those with whom the imagination has not early employed itself about supernatural and so-called sacred things. The avenues into that far country are choked up, and well-nigh obliterated by the growth of years, and the gathering of the inevitable débris of our life in the flesh. No doubt it was through pondering on this mournfully demonstrable fact that the astute sage of Israel, in his own dry and joyless latter day, was led to counsel the remembrance of the Creator in the days of youth, while the wings of fancy are yet free, — before the chains of sensual habit are riveted upon the soul, and the days of utter disenchantment come.

It was, at all events, from something like a trance of happy contemplation of things which her young eyes had assuredly never seen, that Ruth Curwen found herself awakened suddenly on the winter night in question, by a vaguely ominous sound which came faintly to her sanctum from below. Who does not know it, - that swift recognition of the footsteps of coming calamity, one moment before the ghastly shape of it appears in view? A piercing note in the peal of a housebell; the muffled closing of a door; the fancied echo of a smothered cry: Ruth's dream of heaven had dissolved in sudden darkness, even before she heard the flying feet of Constance on the stair, and the vain recall of Mrs. Rothery issued, with what seemed unwonted sternness, from behind. The next instant her door was assaulted so violently that Ruth had scarcely strength to withdraw its bolt, and her sister burst in with the wailing cry: -

"Oh, Ruthie, it has come!"

"Guardian!" gasped the other.

" Yes."

Ruth struggled for an instant to maintain an impossible calm, then fell into the arms of Constance, and the two orphans, twice bereft, sobbed wildly together.

Constance was the first to recover herself. "Hark!" she cried, "she is calling. She is coming, but we won't let her in here;" and she hastily bolted the door again, without Ruth's fully realizing what had been done.

"He is dead, then," she moaned, in a despairing

whisper. "How - where?"

"They don't know exactly. It was near Petersburg; only a skirmish, they call it; but he was in command. There is a run there, — a sort of river, you know. They fought by the bank, and on the bridge, and it was dark, and all confusion. He's only reported missing," cried Constance, with a fresh burst of weeping, "and he might be a prisoner, only the dispatch says it is but too likely that he was wounded among the very first, and fell, and was drowned, with many others, in the stream."

"And still," murmured Ruth, in a low voice, and having suddenly controlled herself, "it is not

certain."

The door was tried, and the commanding voice of Mrs. Rothery, all unshaken, was heard to say outside: "Open this at once, girls, and come down out of the cold."

Constance paid absolutely no heed to the summons, and even Ruth delayed an instant, while a thought passed through her mind, which was destined to assume for her in days to come the semblance of a vow.

"Open the door, I say. Do you hear me?"
Ruth disengaged herself from her sister's arms;

and, with tremulous little fingers, once more with-drew the bolt. Mrs. Rothery opened the door, but did not enter. She stood still for an instant upon the threshold, with an inscrutable look; and then said quietly, and almost dryly: "I desire you both to follow me, and attend calmly to what I have to say." She led the way down one flight of stairs into the sisters' room, where, as always in the winter evenings, a clear fire was burning. By this, when she had admitted the shivering pair and closed the door behind her, she took up her position, and began:—

"We were all of us in a measure prepared, or ought to have been, for the bad news that has come to-night. There is, however, no need of making it any worse than it really is; and hysterics will be wholly out of place. There is no certainty that my brother is dead; and, if he were," she added, steadily, "it is myself whom his loss would first and most concern."

Constance shook her head involuntarily, but Ruth stood passive, bravely endeavoring to control the tremors that shook her frame.

Possibly a part of the seeming hardness with which Mrs. Rothery eyed her was due to the unwonted necessity she felt of putting a restraint upon herself. However, the substance of her next remark was considerate, if not tender.

"I shall leave you two alone now, and you will not, perhaps, care to come down again this evening. I shall send you some hot brandy and water, Ruth, and I advise you to drink it all. This is no time for fruitless discussion, but I cannot help reminding you that it is a very poor preparation for the shocks of life, whatever it may be for the glories of heaven, to hide yourself away in deadly cold rooms until your blood is thoroughly chilled, and your vitality at the lowest ebb. Good-night, Connie: you are sane enough to go quietly to sleep, like a good child, I know. Good-night, Ruth."

Left alone, the two once more wound their arms together, and sank down before the fire, much as they had done on their first blank, bewildered night in Boston. Both remembered that evening vividly, and presently they spoke of it to one another, Constance with unchecked weeping, for fear they might never hear again the pleasant voice which had brightened their depression then; Ruth far more composedly. It was she who now dissuaded her volatile junior from despair, being buoyed up in her own mind by the hourly increasing strength of a secret, and very solemn purpose.

When a week had passed without any authentic tidings concerning Amory's fate, and there had been time to communicate fully with Judge Ford in New York, Mrs. Rothery disclosed her intention of herself paying a visit to the seat of war. In fact, she had long desired to get a nearer view of the scene of the great conflict, and she knew that extraordinary facilities and privileges would be granted her because of her distinguished services

on behalf of the Sanitary Commission. She would take no attendant with her, but finally reconsidered her first refusal of the chivalrously proffered escort of the elder St. John, and consented to be joined in New York by that stately gentleman. Miss Ingestre, who had been on her annual winter visit to her native city when the report arrived of the night skirmish near Petersburg and the disappearance of Major Wallis, tarried only just long enough to have a hurried interview at the railway station with her friend before her own return to New England.

"I go to the dear girls, of course, Jane," she said, "but I thought I would just ask you if you had any preference about their coming to me in my house, or my going to them in yours."

"It's very good of you to consult me at all," was the sub-acid reply. "If you must be under the same roof, of which I don't quite see the necessity, though it's well enough for somebody to have an eye on the girls, do you by all means go to my house. It will break up their habits less. But mind," as a sharp whistle sounded, and Stanton St. John, Sen., approached, with hat raised to Miss Ingestre in one hand, and tickets for Washington in the other, — "mind how you pamper and encourage Ruth in her latest fancies."

Estelle telegraphed to the sisters that she would be with them on the ensuing day, and, her train suffering no detention, for the weather had grown suddenly mild, she arrived in Butternut Street when the daylight of the already considerably lengthened winter afternoon had hardly begun to wane.

"You are in mourning for him!" she shrieked, throwing up her tiny hands before her face, to shut out the sight of Ruth when the latter advanced to meet her. "Oh, surely, my sweet girl, surely this is premature!"

"I am not in mourning," Ruth answered softly.

"Dear Miss Ingestre, it is so good of you to come!

I am only wearing the dress I have longed to wear ever since Mrs. Rothery allowed me to choose my own."

"But it is funeste, is n't it, Miss Ingestre?" cried Constance from behind. "She does n't mind it's being hideous; but you just tell her that it is funeste!"

"Dear Connie," said Ruth with a wan, sweet smile, "that is such a foolish French word. Nothing, I fancy, can be really funeste;" and she, too, appealed with her dark, wistful eyes to Miss Ingestre.

The lady gazed at her aghast. Ruth was clad in a perfectly plain garment of dead-black serge, the clinging of whose heavy folds was the more conspicuous from the fact that it was customary for all feminine skirts in those days to be inflated by a sort of balloon-like machinery. Estelle felt the blood rush to her heart, and her voice choked with consternation. Was it possible that a consistent following out of the opinions which she fully believed herself to share with this little de-

votee, would involve anything of this sort in her own case? The picture presented to her mind was too startling. She turned desperately from one sister to the other. "Don't say another word, either of you," she entreated. "I don't know what to think of it. I must reflect;" and she proceeded audibly to do so. "Most grievous and gruesome indeed, but then so effective! Connie, have you not noticed — Ruth, you angel, is it possible you did not know yourself that the dress is immensely becoming?"

Ruth colored high, with a look of complex pain; and when Estelle began anxiously to apologize for what she herself felt to be the indelicacy of the suggestion, the girl cut her short with gentle dignity. "Let us take off your wraps, Miss Ingestre, before we discuss my clothes any more. By and by," she murmured in the lady's ear, when Constance had for a moment turned aside, "I will tell you all about it."

And did Ruth know that she was handsomer than ever in her garb of would-be mortification? It may truly be said on her behalf that she tried hard not to know it. Hers would indeed have been an exceptional, may we not say solitary case, had no taint of feminine vanity, no secret relish for the excitement attendant on a daring and decisive step, mingled with the motives which urged her at this time to declare in some sort of unmistakable fashion her own overmastering sense of separation from the world. To say this, is only

to say that Ruth was human, and of the more helpless as well as harmless order of humanity. She was a delicate plant set in an alien soil, yearning for the warmth of a more congenial country, stretching vaguely out for indispensable support; and up to this time the only *confidante* of her deepest experiences, her chief adviser in spiritual things, had been Estelle herself!

She told her story very simply the first time they two were alone, and in a manner to draw floods of tears of mingled admiration and compunction from the eyes of that sage lady.

"You know," Ruth said, "how I have dreaded a life in the world, and the time when I must go into society. But for the war, and dear guardian's absence, and all things being so sad and uncertain, it would have come this year, and I should not have known how to avoid it. But now — I see you wonder how I can speak of him so calmly. Well, this is the way: I think he is living, and will come home to you all"—

"Oh, my child," cried Estelle, impatience getting the better of sympathy, "don't say you!"

"I must say you, dear Miss Ingestre, for I am bound. That night, when Connie came to tell me, for a moment all was black, — no hope anywhere in earth or heaven. I knew I must leave the world if he were dead, and yet I felt there would be no goodness in leaving it, for what could I have then to renounce? Then something seemed to say to me quite distinctly, 'Renounce the world now,

once for all, without conditions, and he shall live to do much good in it.' So I took my resolve. And I thought, but perhaps I was wrong, that it would be a good thing to put on this dress directly. It might use Connie a little to the idea; and I did not think Mrs. Rothery would interfere just then. Besides, she has refused to have anything to say about my clothes since I was eighteen, and I have always ordered them very plain."

The steadiness with which Ruth told her tale had the unwonted effect of thoroughly sobering the elder lady. She recognized the case as one too serious for her management, and perceived that to essay anything like opposition, while their present grave suspense lasted, would be but to strengthen the girl in her suicidal resolve. She did observe, however, and not without point:—

"It seems to me, my love, that what you need is a director; a professional one, you know. I am beginning to feel that I need one too. I've been told that there is some hope that one of those two very holy young men, who have been turned out of their parishes in the south of England lately—(I forget their names, but you must have read the account of their trial—most interesting)—will come over here, and I do most earnestly hope it may be true. A martyr for the truth, like that, would set us all right, don't you think so? You would be guided by a real martyr, would you not, my sweet?"

"I am sure I ought," was the submissive answer.

There were three days more of anxious waiting, and then the hearts of our friends were suddenly lightened of the heaviest portion of their load. Major Wallis was living a prisoner at Macon, and before Mrs. Rothery's return, Judge Ford had been able to transmit to the sisters a few lines in Amory's own hand, saying that though he had fainted ignominiously through loss of blood, it had been from two comparatively slight flesh-wounds, both of which were healing rapidly; and that, for the rest, his situation as a prisoner was so comfortable, he might say luxurious, compared with that of his wounded men at Andersonville, that he begged them not to waste a thought upon it.

Both Miss Ingestre and Constance watched Mrs. Rothery keenly on the first night of her return, to see what notice she would take of Ruth's conventual garb. She took absolutely none. That masterful and self-masterful woman was able to speak and act and look as though she perceived nothing extraordinary about the slim black figure. But of course Estelle assailed her on the subject the moment they were alone:—

- "Well, Jane, what do you think of it?"
- "Of what?"

[&]quot;Oh, come, my dear! I understood your reticence while the girls were present, and do me the justice to observe that I respected it. But now! I revere her zeal, Jane, and I must n't betray confidence; but I do assure you that, unless something is done to prevent it, that glorious creature will be in a convent before she's twenty."

Mrs. Rothery's lip curled in a slight, grim smile. She regarded her companion fixedly for a few seconds, and then said slowly and emphatically:—

"Well, Estelle, I am going to prevent it! But I don't propose at present to tell you how."

CHAPTER XIV.

Mrs. Rothery's plan had the simplicity which might have been expected from her direct and forcible character. It had suggested itself to her mind several times during the previous year, but she had postponed its consideration to the pressing claims of public business, opining that there was plenty of time before them all. Now, however, with the close of the war immediately in view, and Amory's consequent return, she felt impelled to decisive action. She had long since taken contemptuous cognizance of a certain "sickly sentiment," as she called it, for her brother on the part of his elder ward. She had counted on that sentiment's dying a natural death as soon as the girl should be introduced to the world, and the men of her own generation. It had hardly occurred to her until very lately to connect the superfluous piety and make-believe austerities (as she termed them), which the encouragement and imitation of Estelle did much to render purely ridiculous in her eyes, with Ruth's love-sick preoccupation. But at last, the thing had arrived at a pitch which fairly passed her — Mrs. Rothery's — patience; and she felt that there was no time to be lost. Already, on the return journey from the seat of war, after Amory was known to be safe, Jane had cautiously sounded her ceremonious traveling companion, and had met with a most favorable response. The way was clear. The end of her own regency was no doubt at hand. Before Amory was once more among them, Ruth she resolved should be fast betrothed to Stanton St. John, Jr.

It was characteristic, moreover, of this great strategist manqué, that she took as little account of the probable wishes of the two young persons themselves as any guardian of an old-world heiress of the highest social rank could have done. Ruth was all made up of sentimentality; and sentimentality Mrs. Rothery had been wont to regard as a troublesome plant, which, if left to itself, would send forth long and feeble shoots, feeling blindly for some external support, but which might, if properly cut back and compressed in its root-room, be transformed into a tolerably hardy shrub.

It was on this principle that she had arranged and enforced her tonic system of education for the sisters; and it can hardly be needful to say that that system, as originally constructed, left no room for any thoughts of marriage until these young persons should be well on in their twenties. It had been an admirable system, but the best of such, Mrs. Rothery knew, will sometimes fail. Ruth's development as a vine seemed after all, at the close of her nineteenth year, to be hopelessly far advanced. Cling and depend she evidently would; and here, fortunately, was a sturdy little prop at band which might be utilized for her support.

The very contempt which Mrs. Rothery felt for the mental capacity of Stanton St. John, Jr., led her to expect to find in him a ready instrument. It was true that he had hitherto shown a decided preference for playing (in the privacy of her own mental councils, Mrs. Rothery called it "fooling") with Constance. Very well: Constance should be temporarily taken out of his way. On the other hand, Jane apprehended no very protracted difficulty in the business of transferring Ruth's affections. She had been wont to consider as too weak to be read certain popular novels which made much both of the susceptibility and the mutability of their heroines' fancies, but now - rather inconsistently for Jane — she reverted to these very romances for her examples.

A few weeks later, that is to say, early in March, Ruth was formally released from regular attendance in the schoolroom, and was told that her place would be in the parlor henceforth, and her first duties those which she owed to her social circle. The ridiculous dress, which she continued to affect, was still an exceedingly sore point with her gouvernante, but the wise and wary schemer managed to hold her tongue about that, reflecting that the spring was unusually early, and opining that the first really hot weather of the season would probably settle the question of black serge without any arbitrary interference.

And then came that strange and ever-memorable Holy Week, of uttermost triumph and tragedy, which beheld both the final surrender of the Southern army and the assassination of President Lincoln. Even Ruth had been thoroughly distracted from the other world by the solemnity of the crisis here below, but Mrs. Rothery, amid all the intense and manifold public excitement, kept a firm grasp of her own private purposes. The end of the war had come, and Amory would now, of a certainty, soon be among them. When he wrote that he should not even pay them a visit until his decimated regiment had been disbanded, she was thankful that a little clear space was thus left for active operations; and as a preliminary step she dispatched Constance for the long promised and prevented visit to Hannah Shippen, an arrangement highly satisfactory to Hannah and the child.

For, child at seventeen, Constance still emphatically was ignorant of life, of people, and, in spite of Mrs. Rothery's carefully engaged masters, of books. A happy, thoughtless little maiden, whose opinions were a curious jumble of Mrs. Rothery's sense and Miss Ingestre's sentiment, and were apt to oscillate from one to the other as either seemed to favor her momentary inclinations, or to furnish her with an excuse for evading the natural consequences of some peccadillo, she shrank from all suffering, mental and physical, with an intensity which was almost cowardly.

She danced gayly into the life of the little New Hampshire village, and apparently adopted all its customs readily. She made friends in forty-eight hours with all the young people of the place, and thenceforward became the heart of all their gatherings, and the promoter of their excursions by wood, and field, and mountain. She taught the girls the latest ideas in dress and fancy-work, and was so easily first in everything she undertook that they sank into inferior positions as resignedly as though she had been a veritable goddess descended among them.

She found it one of the fashions of the town that every lassie should have her laddie, to be her particular slave, — to attend her home from evening gatherings, to carry her basket on picnics, and her pail on berryings; and, having ne'er a one herself on the first of such occasions which she attended, proceeded from that time forth to have her choice among them all, the youths habitually applying for the honor of being her escort, before retiring (all save the one successful competitor) upon their old favorites.

Constance took this homage lightly, and distributed her favors impartially, while Miss Shippen regarded her favorite's triumphs with grim pleasure, and shone in a reflected glory. Constance was extremely frank with Hannah about all her doings, and seemed to feel that she had a great work to accomplish in the way of enlightening the youthful population of the town, though the exact nature of her mission she did not clearly explain.

Miss Shippen believed in letting people alone, and, though occasionally she attempted reproof, her undercurrent of delight in Constance's enjoyment was too strong to be concealed even at such times. Finally, however, an event occurred which she felt must be treated seriously. The two sixteen-year-old sons of the minister and the doctor, firmest of friends until that summer, appeared on the Wilton street one day with their faces in a battered and bulging condition; and rumor followed close on their heels, assigning a fight as the cause of their disfigurement, and Miss Curwen as the cause of the fight.

The report reached Miss Shippen at dusk, when she went to "get the milk," for which purpose she made a daily expedition at that hour, pitcher in hand, to a neighbor's back door; and having decided that she must remonstrate, she began guardedly at the tea-table:—

"Seen Dick Grey or Bob Whately lately, Connie?" These were the two pugilists.

The girl looked up serenely. "Oh, yes. I was obliged to, of course."

" Why?"

"Because I'd told them to fight," she explained sweetly. This was further than rumor itself, though not usually considered timorous, had ventured to go. Miss Shippen was amazed.

"Law sakes, Constance Curwen, you don't mean that!"

"Indeed I do, Shippie. They were so jealous of each other, that at last I suggested that they should settle the matter by single combat in the

old fashion, and said that I would abide by the result. I was thinking of something picturesque, like the 'Morte d'Arthur,' of course, with armor and horses and lances, — I thought they would adopt it, — but they just pounded one another with their fists till they were tired, and then came and asked me to choose between them. You see, Shippie, I had agreed to receive the victor out in the orchard; and I was waiting there with Mary Matthews and reading 'Elaine' aloud to keep us in the proper frame of mind, when there appeared these two creatures — such a spectacle! I had to be very plain. I'm afraid they thought me severe."

"What did ye do?"

"I told them that they'd not done what I intended, and that I'd never have anything to say to either of them again."

Miss Shippen's intended reproof resolved itself into amusement, as usual. "They must 'a' been

took aback when you told 'em that, Connie."

"Yes, when they saw I meant it. They did n't at first. People are primitive here, Shippie! They do amusing things, and I like it, you know, but they don't seem to know the spirit in which they ought to be doing them."

"What now?"

"Why, after the boys were gone Mary Matthews and I had quite a discussion, and though I know I was right, I did n't succeed in convincing her. She's very positive," said Constance with a sigh.

Hannah chuckled.

"Shippie, I think I'll tell you all about it, for I'm sure you'll see. It began by her saying, directly Dick and Bob were gone, that she thought it was flirting heartlessly, to snub boys for doing just what I'd told them to do; and when I explained to her that they had n't carried out my idea at all, Mary said that the men must have looked just as horrid, a great many of them, when they came out of tourneys; and she could n't seem to see that it made any difference whether you arrived at a thing picturesquely or not, but she only kept repeating that they had fought because I told them to, and that, unless I had expected one of them to kill the other, I ought not to have behaved so. People are n't often killed in duels, are they?"

"That depends on the natur' of the men, my dear."

"Well, Dick and Bob did n't kill each other; and I'm very glad."

"Goodness gracious, Constance Curwen, how you talk!"

"I'm afraid you don't understand either, Shippie," said Constance regretfully. "It was a sort of revival of chivalry that I meant to introduce."

"Revival of fiddlesticks!"

Constance looked offended. "You need n't be contemptuous, for I really know what I mean. Miss Ingestre read Ruthie and me a great deal about it years ago, — tourneys and courts of love and troubadours. She understands the subject thoroughly; and she told us she wished those times could be revived."

"It strikes me," said Miss Shippen, scornfully, "that Miss Ingestre might have been better occupied than in stuffing the heads of you two children with such nonsense. What does Mrs. Rothery say to them views?"

"We never talk about such things with her; of course she would n't understand!"

Miss Shippen snorted, but Constance did not notice, and pursued magnanimously: "I like some of Mrs. Rothery's ideas, too. Now about flirting. Mary Matthews and I discussed that, too; and I told her—but she did n't seem to understand—flirting is making people think you love them when you don't, is n't it?"

Hannah nodded.

"Well, Mrs. Rothery thinks — I heard her say so to guardian before he went away, and I always remembered — she said that until a girl is twenty-five she ought to be just 'developing,' — learning lessons, I suppose, and that sort of thing; and that she ought to see enough of men not to be awkward, but never think of love. Well, then, how can she flirt? I think it's a very good idea: it makes everything so simple. Don't you think that's the way to bring girls up, Shippie?"

"I think if girls were n't 'brought up' so much, but were let alone to grow up naturally, it would

be considerably better for 'em."

"But then their minds would n't be trained, and they would n't be rational human beings."

"Mother wit's a good deal more useful to a

woman than rules and receipts, in my opinion," said Miss Shippen. "But after all 't ain't any real business of mine. An' ain't ever likely to be neither," she added.

"Oh, I'm quite sure, Shippie, that a woman can't know too much; though it's a bore having to do it sometimes, of course. 'There's no greater safeguard than mental resources,' Mrs. Rothery says; and I suppose it must be because of my German exercises that I saw the matter so much more sensibly than Mary this afternoon. But how droll!" and Constance went into one of her tinkling peals of laughter.

"Then, Connie, you ain't got to care for any of the boys here?"

"No, indeed, Shippie. I wonder you can suggest such a thing after what I've told you."

"Well, I'm relieved," observed Miss Shippen, rising and beginning to clear the table, "for the idea that there might be something serious began to nag me when I heard of the fight, an' I could n't decide what 't would be my duty to do."

"You need n't disturb yourself any more," said Constance loftily. "I shall not think of 'anything serious,' as you call it, till I'm twenty-five; and if I were to, there are people I should much prefer to these boys. Now I am going to write to Ruth."

Constance beat a dignified retreat, and composed her mind, and then her weekly letter to her sister, a document which the fear of Mrs. Rothery's perusal usually made short, and commonplace.

Ruth, whose part of the correspondence Mrs. Rothery did not assume to overlook, wrote much more fully in reply, faithfully rehearing all the events of her daily life in her own sweet, yet picturesque fashion. They saw a great deal of the Stanton St. Johns, - more than ever, Ruth fancied, but perhaps that was because she herself was no longer in the schoolroom. Ruth went nearly every day to read to Miss Ingestre. The new little chapel on the Point, in which they were both so much interested, and for the building of which Miss Ingestre had given so very liberally, was almost finished, and there was coming to officiate there a very noble young Englishman — noble in character, of course she meant - who had been really persecuted for the faith (although such things were said to be no longer possible) in his native country. "Fancy, Connie, he has actually been in prison; and I have seen him at Miss Ingestre's. He would come up almost to your ideas of a hero, Con, if he were dressed like a soldier instead of a priest." To Amory Wallis the letters contained almost no allusion beyond such remarks as, "Dear guardian's return is again postponed," or, "I enclose you a letter from guardian to us both, but please return it."

Mrs. Rothery meanwhile, with something less than her wonted impartiality, continued to draw favorable auguries for the success of her scheme from the extremely easy and friendly relations which had grown up between Ruth and young Stanton in the absence of the boy's gayer comrade. Ruth had adopted the quietest elder sisterly way with him, and though Stanton could by no means forbear occasionally chaffing her on her austerities, he did her soft behests in the most docile manner, and evidently regarded her with vast, and humble admiration. At this point, however, matters threatened so plainly to stop, that it seemed good to Mrs. Rothery, before the end of June, to write to Hannah Shippen that, since Constance appeared to be enjoying her stay, and the climate suited her so well, she had her (Jane's) consent to lengthening her New Hampshire visit by a few weeks, provided only she were at home in time to meet her guardian when he came.

Hardly had this gracious and disinterested permission been received when it was invalidated by an unforeseen event. Scarlet fever broke out in Wilton; and Hannah Shippen, after making sure that Constance had not been exposed to the disease, kept the girl a close prisoner in a camphorscented house for forty-eight hours, during which time she brought order and cleanliness into her somewhat recklessly used wardrobe, and heralded her immediate return to Massachusetts by a letter to Mrs. Rothery. Then she herself escorted Constance to where a main line of railway could be taken, put her into a "through car," mentioned her to the conductor, and left her to make her five hours' journey to Boston alone.

The solitary progress gave Constance a pleasing

sense of exhibaration and importance. She did experience a momentary arrest of spirits when, after alighting from the train, and looking long up and down, she perceived, beyond a peradventure, that there was no familiar face awaiting her at the Boston station. But she had only to pass from the "arrival" to the "departure" side; and this was accomplished uneventfully, as also the hour's jostling in an accommodation train to the shore. But when, even there in the little local station, nobody appeared on the lookout for herself, she felt unaccountably chagrined, and in fact, between hope deferred, and wounded vanity, she was not far from tears. There, however, was the man from the village livery-stable, conducting, as usual, a forlorn-hope in the shape of a rickety landau; and having ensconced herself therein, and driven rapidly to the cottage, she soon had the mystery solved.

There lay Hannah Shippen's letter unopened on Mrs. Rothery's desk. Somehow or other it had been delayed in transmission, and had only arrived after that lady's departure by an early train to attend "some sort of a last meeting in Boston," as the maid rather vaguely described the object of her journey. Ruth was out sailing with the Stan-

ton St. Johns.

Constance immediately resolved upon giving the ladies the joy of a great surprise. To this end she bound the maids to secrecy as to her arrival, and, having put on a cool frock and eaten a substantial

lunch, proceeded to wait the return of the absentees.

At first she sat down on the veranda. Then, reflecting that her presence there might be discerned from afar, she repaired to the drawing-room, opened the French window, but drew the curtains so that no glimpse of her voluminous petticoats was possible from without, and then ensconced herself on her favorite couch, with the book with which she had supplied herself for her unattended journey, and over which she speedily fell asleep.

She was awakened by voices outside, and before she became fully conscious of her position, had overheard such a very interesting scrap of conversation that she really could not bring herself to interrupt it. Trying to quiet her conscience by the plea that it evidently related to her sister, and therefore might be considered her own affair, she drew her breath softly and listened.

It was the staccato tones of Miss Ingestre that were saying: "I know our precious Ruth a great deal better than you do, — we are quite one at heart, as you are aware, — and I tell you, Jane, it will never, never be. Of course, I have seen your game from the first, — as if you could ever have deluded me! — and the only wonder is that even you, with all your hardihood, should have dreamed of trying to force a union between two such utterly incongruous natures."

"As to that," replied the dry voice of Mrs. Rothery, "contrast is much more likely to attract

than similarity, and the only chance—I grant you it's a slender one—of making, not a sensible woman, perhaps, but a possible one, out of Ruth, is to marry her early to some honest, commonplace, worthy, and worldly man. Such a man, I believe, this boy will become."

Constance, in her excitement, sprang upright upon her chaise longue, at the imminent risk of revealing her presence by the crackle of her stiff draperies. She would not, for her life, have gone away at this point, and what followed was even

more thrilling.

"Jane Rothery," interrupted Estelle, dropping her voice almost an octave, with considerable effect, "I really cannot listen to you. There is to me something not very far off from blasphemy in merely coupling the names of Ruth Curwen and Stanton St. John. Look on that angel and this hobbledehoy! But the worst of it is, that all the while you have been plotting and planning this piece of — of — high-handed encroachment on the liberties of two unsuspecting young people — little Constance, too! — keeping her away all these weeks! — you must have known in your own soul, if you have one, just as well as I do, that all of Ruth's heart which is n't given to Heaven has been irrevocably bestowed elsewhere."

"Estelle Ingestre,"—and Constance perfectly understood the slow pronunciation of that fair lady's full name to signify the extreme of exasperation on Mrs. Rothery's part,—"it is really time for

you to have done with this superannuated folly. If at near fifty — excuse me, I don't often mention your age, but you know that I know it to a day, - if at your time of life, I say, you really believe that any girl of nineteen can be what you call 'irrevocably in love,' then all I can say is, that you must indeed be almost as great an idiot as it is your favorite pastime to pretend to be. But I know better." And the sneer in Mrs. Rothery's tones was so perceptible at this point that Constance clenched her little fists in silent fury. "I know very well that such a morbid and disgusting display of what people are pleased to call piety, as Ruth has indulged in of late, is apt, in a young woman of her temperament, to be merely the partial transmutation of an entirely earthly sentiment. But to expect such a feeling to be permanent, in either of its phases," —

"You had better say no more now," Estelle interrupted, with unwonted gravity. "The yacht has come back, and I see them at the landing."

Constance had forgotten for the moment her own position and plan for a dramatic surprise of the family. The greater excitement had swallowed up the less. Now, however, she started up and sped noiselessly by a back stairway to the long chamber above the schoolroom, where she first relieved her mind by several violent stamps, then darted to the mirror, twitched her skirts, and twined her hair, and presently descended, as from a cloud, among the astonished group on the veranda, which now included the sailing party.

Her greetings and explanations were a little incoherently delivered; but they all thought—Stanton, Jr., especially—that her eyes had never been so bright, and her color was applauded as reflecting the highest credit on mountain air and fare.

CHAPTER XV.

In the midst of the babel of talk which naturally succeeded to the first éclat of Constance's apparition on the veranda, she contrived to telegraph to Stanton St. John, Jr., her pressing need for a private interview. The youth leered intelligently in response, - first in the direction of the shore, and then of the croquet ground. Constance negatived the former proposition with her pretty eyebrows, and with the same expressive feature rather dubiously accepted the latter. Stanton acted with admirable promptitude. The sailing party had lunched upon the yacht, Mrs. Rothery in town, and Constance in solitary grandeur, as we have seen, and the lady of the house had just issued orders that tea should be served on the veranda. Whereupon — "I say Con," observed Stanton, artlessly, "you and I don't want any tea. Come along and have a game. I'll bet a dollar you're all out of practice, and that I beat you in three turns."

"Indeed you won't, then. The Wilton boys play splendidly, and some of the girls, too. But I'll come with great pleasure; I shall be delighted to show you." And, rising with a nod which included the rest of the party, she tripped airily away

with her follower at her heels.

Their strategy, however, was destined to be disconcerted. The elder St. John had an antipathy to tea, and deprecated the increasing fashion for its consumption. With an apology to the ladies, "I think I will go and look on at this famous duel," he said; and Constance found herself so baffled by his benign apparition on the field of combat, as painfully to discredit, by her playing, the vaunted proficiency of Wilton. After criticising with much asperity several masterly strokes on the part of her antagonist, she threw down her mallet, and professed herself "too tired, after all." But she contrived to murmur to Stanton, when they were putting away their implements, "You must come over in the morning, early! It is of the utmost importance."

Meanwhile Mrs. Rothery, after venting a little of her natural displeasure at having been taken by surprise, observed that there was no certainty that Constance had not taken the scarlatina infection, and that she should not herself be free from anxiety for at least ten days.

"And Ruth," exclaimed Estelle, suddenly alarmed for her own favorite, "Ruth must come home with me, and stay there until all danger is past."

Jane did not altogether approve this plan, but saw no alternative, while to Ruth herself the proposition was so unwelcome that she accepted it upon the instant, with merely a stillborn sigh of disappointment at the lengthened separation from Connie. The arrangement was fully completed for her to occupy one of Miss Ingestre's guest-rooms during the ensuing fortnight, before the two conspirators reappeared upon the scene, with volubility upon their lips and candor on their brows.

Ten o'clock A. M. on the following day had been assigned as a propitious hour for their meeting. Constance was on the look-out for her cavalier, and met him in the back shrubbery. No lessons had as yet been organized, and Ruth was already gone to Miss Ingestre's.

"Well, now," said Stanton, when greetings had passed, "What's up? It's awfully nice to have you at home, anyway," he added, in parenthesis.

"I thought, for a very little while, that it was going to be nice to be back," returned the girl, enigmatically.

"Well, is n't it?"

"I'm not so sure. That's why I wanted to see you."

"Here I am, then. What's the row?"

"The mistake was in my going away at all. I could have prevented it. Mrs. Rothery saw that herself, and so she sent me. I only hope I'm not too late."

"What on earth is the matter?"

"Then you have n't suspected?"

"Suspected what?"

Constance eyed him closely. "I don't believe you have," she said, when she had completed her

inspection, "and Ruth is too nice ever to suspect anything. Oh, how clever she is, and how I hate her!" and Constance raised a little sun-browned hand tightly clenched.

"I don't think you ought to talk like that about your sister, you know," observed Stanton quite soberly.

"Like what?"

"Say you hate her."

"Oh, it is n't she I hate, you stupid! A girl would have known at once whom I meant."

"Who, then?"

But Constance followed her own methods, and having an important subject in hand, preferred to begin by settling preliminaries. "Stanton," she demanded, "what do you think about listening?"

- "Being seen and not heard, do you mean? They say that's the thing."
- "No, not at all. I mean really, deliberately listening to what you were n't in the least intended to hear."
 - "Why, I call that dirt mean."
 - "Always?" Her face fell.
 - "Yes, always."
- "There were the spies. It was thought very fine to discover what the rebels were doing."
- "Was it? It never struck me so. It was awfully convenient to know what they were up to, of course; but we didn't treat their spies as if we looked on it as exactly an honorable occupation."
 - "They were rebels."

- "Yes; but I don't see that that makes much difference."
 - "Guardian has done it."
- "Well, then, I suppose I'm wrong. But I thought you wanted to tell me something."
- "This is part of it. I 've been listening, and as 't was to a plot against Ruth, I think I was right."
 - "Perhaps, in that case. Who's plotting?"
- "Mrs. Rothery. It's she I hate, and always have hated, since I saw her first. She was talking to Miss Ingestre. You're sure you don't know?"

A variety of emotions contorted the face of Stanton St. John, Jr., into a complex grimace; but he shook his head silently.

Constance delivered her startling intelligence deliberately and with emphasis. "She means to make you marry Ruth because she's so terribly in love."

- "Oh, come now!" he expostulated.
- "She is indeed. There's not the slightest doubt about that."
- "Your sister never said or did a single thing to lead me to think so."
- "Why should she? Oh! You thought I meant that she was in love with you! It is n't that. It's quite hopelessly with somebody else."

Then, knowing how slowly information permeated the brain with which she had to deal, Constance allowed her companion time to reflect, and waited, controlling her impatience, until he spoke.

"But I don't want to marry Ruth, and I don't see why I should."

"It's just to save Mrs. Rothery trouble; and, for some reason or other, she wants it to be settled before guardian comes home. She's afraid he'll blame her, or something."

"I suppose I shall have to do it, then," he said

with a sigh.

"Why, no, you must n't! That 's just it; and we must contrive in some way to prevent it."

"Do you suppose we can?" he inquired, with a

shade more of animation.

- "Oh, I think so, if we give our minds to it. You might go away."
 - "Grandfather would n't let me."

"Not if you told him" —

- "Oh, by George! I could n't get up the cheek to go to him with such a story as that!"
- "Truly? Well, I'm sorry, because that was my idea, provided I found that you did n't really care for Ruth."
- "If I had cared for her, what would you have done?"
- "No matter now! I'd have done something. I never, never would have stood by tamely and seen my sister sacrificed; but it would have been very difficult for me."

"If Ruth does n't like it, she can say so."

Constance flung down her arms despairingly. "Have you known Ruth all these years without learning that the more she hates to do a thing, the more she thinks she ought to do it?"

"That's a fact," he assented gloomily.

"So I've said nothing to her about the matter. I knew it would n't be of the slightest use. We must manage quite by ourselves."

"Could n't you write to Major Wallis?"

"I thought of that, but it would do no good. He always does what she says."

"What made her pick me out, I wonder?" said the young man in injured tones.

"It was because you were convenient, and she thought she could make you do what she wanted, and she thought you were suitable."

"She might have seen with half an eye that I did n't like Ruth half so well as you."

"Don't you, honestly? I'm so glad!"

"No. If it had been you, I should n't have minded particularly. In fact, I 've always meant it should be you, — some time or other."

"I had fancied so too," she assented with the sweetest sang-froid, "until now"—

"Just so! We understood it in a way between ourselves. If we'd only spoken out! But I thought they'd row because we were so young, and that perhaps, after all, there was n't any time lost, don't you know?"

"I know very well," was the sententious answer.

"Do you think, if we were to own up now, it would stop this thing?"

"It ought. What could she do but disapprove? and how can she do that, when she was all ready to let you have Ruth?"

"It sounds smooth," murmured the young man

ruefully, "but I'm awfully afraid, if she has set her heart on the other, she'll manage it just the same."

Constance tossed her little head, and turned away. "By all means marry Ruth," she said, "if you prefer it. Don't let me hinder you."

"Oh, I say"—he sprang after her—"I did n't mean that, and you know it."

Constance was but half mollified. She considered a moment before she said, slowly and impressively, "Then go at once and tell Mrs. Rothery that we're engaged, — you and I."

The lips of Stanton St. John, Jr., seemed about to emit a whistle, but, for the first time in his life, that natural and cheerful form of repartee stuck in his throat. He said, presently, "Very well. Here goes!" and started off toward the house.

Constance was completely won by his prompt obedience. "Would you like me to go with you?" she inquired kindly.

"Do!" he assented, with fervent gratitude; "and Con, I say, you might be thinking up what we shall do next, in case our engagement doesn't bring her round, for 'pon my word of honor I can't marry Ruth."

"She's a great deal too good for you!"

"Precisely; and she'd expect a fellow to pass his life reading good books, and visiting the poor, and eating fish Fridays, — and, by George! I tell you I could n't."

"Well," said Constance, after a short pause, and

with an air of great mystery. "I have thought of one other thing, but I cannot say it aloud."

"Whisper it, then!" and Stanton bent his ear somewhat ostentatiously. But the word which was dropped therein caused his rubicund complexion to become several shades paler. "By Jove!" he breathed, and an oath by the father of the Latin Gods was ever with him by several degrees more solemn than his customary appeal to the shades of England's Hanoverian kings. "Come on!" he added shortly, as one who leads a charge.

They skirted the dwelling, mounted the veranda, and discerning, through one of the open French windows, Mrs. Rothery in the library at her Davenport, they paused as if by mutual consent. Constance was the first to find voice. "You're afraid!" she whispered vehemently.

"I never," the ingenuous youth admitted, "was so scared in all my life. I'm shaking in my shoes, and no mistake. Oh, I say, I can't go in like this!"

"Better sit down a minute," she observed, sympathetically.

"No, no. If I did, I might never get up again. There's nothing for it but to make a rush." And therewith he bolted through the French window, and up to Mrs. Rothery's chair, Constance closely following. Before he had fairly come within range of the lady's eye, he began, with the same absence of emphasis or inflection with which a frightened child "says its piece" to its mother's visitor.

"Good morning, Mrs. Rothery. Beg your pardon for interrupting you, but I've come here to tell you something which I think you ought to know."

Mrs. Rothery had glanced up from her notepaper at his first word. Could it be that the helpless embarrassment of his manner heralded the announcement which she most desired, but had by no means expected so soon?

She did her best, considering that possibility, to render her manner gracious and conciliating as she signified her entire willingness to hear him, while at the same time she warned Constance by a look to leave the room. As that young person paid no heed, Mrs. Rothery presently gave her a verbal command to the same effect.

Stanton St. John, Jr., had employed this interval in trying to find courage to continue. Now despair at the prospect of being left alone gave him strength to speak.

"I wish you'd let her stay, Mrs. Rothery, please. I don't mind. In fact, I'd rather."

Mrs. Rothery marveled, but assented, and the other proceeded with a gulp, "We're engaged." Then, to the despair of Constance, he came to a dead stop, and before the girl could decide whether it would be well for her to complete his announcement, Mrs. Rothery was beginning a genial reply.

"Is this really so, Stanton, and do I guess why you have come first to me? Of course I can give no authoritative sanction to your engagement, but

I think I can promise you that the young lady's guardians will make no difficulty. I will inform them, if you like, of what you have told me, and I shall have only pleasant things to say of you. Though, of course, you both seem very young!" And Mrs. Rothery extended her firm hand in her most amiable manner.

Stanton seized it and shook it warmly. His selfconfidence had been rapidly returning while she spoke. He held his head quite jauntily now, and a

beaming smile irradiated his rotund visage.

"You're awfully good to take it so," he said simply. "We are young, that's a fact; and I had n't meant to say anything about it for a while longer, but Constance said "-

An awful suspicion crossed Mrs. Rothery's mind, and a dark frown gathered on her forehead. "Constance said?" - she repeated severely.

The young man was frozen by the change in her manner. He stood mute, and judge and culprit eyed each other intently during a few seconds of suspense. Then Constance tripped forward to the side of Ruth's supposed lover, and addressed Mrs. Rothery.

"It's me he's engaged to," she said sweetly.

Mrs. Rothery's unwonted softness became iron. "Is what Constance says true?" she demanded.

"Well, yes," was the faltering answer. "Did n't

you understand? Did n't I make it clear?"

"No, I did not understand. I could scarcely be expected to understand anything so perfectly preposterous."

"I thought you said" - began Constance, thor-

oughly enjoying the excitement.

- "Don't speak," interrupted Mrs. Rothery. "Your attentions to Ruth, Mr. St. John, have been so pointed of late, and her pleased acceptance of them so plain, as to leave me no suspicion that your communication could relate to any one else. To that I might have reconciled myself, though it would have been just on the verge of the possible. This is beyond it."
- "I don't see that," observed the young man, respectfully but rather doggedly.
- "Constance is a mere baby," said Mrs. Rothery, with fine contempt.
- "I 'm seventeen," retorted that young person with some warmth, "and I'm a great deal more practical than Ruth, every one says."
- "The two years between your age and Ruth's make the difference between a child and a woman."
 - "It's only twenty-two months."
- "We will not argue about it," said Mrs. Rothery, attempting to regain her tone of quiet supremacy. "It simply cannot be. I utterly forbid it. And though you may think me arbitrary now, I assure you you will be very grateful to me some day."

Constance's eyes flashed, and she was on the point of making a retort, but Mrs. Rothery continued, addressing herself to Stanton: "And one thing more, if you do not know what construction the world puts on such conduct as yours has been this summer, you should now be informed that any ordinary observer would have considered that you had serious intentions towards Ruth, which she was encouraging."

"'Pon my word, I never had any such idea, Mrs.

Rothery."

"Then it is to be hoped that she was equally innocent."

"Oh, Ruth don't care a fig about me, I know,"

he said cheerfully.

Mrs. Rothery felt that he must be intimidated. "If there were a gentleman here, he would possibly pursue some more vigorous course. Being a woman, I can only assure you that, unless you wish your visits to bear the interpretation I have given them, you should discontinue them."

Constance could restrain her indignation no longer. "You've no right to forbid him to come here, Mrs. Rothery," she exclaimed. "It's not your house; it's guardian's."

"You are strangely forgetting yourself, Constance. While I am the mistress of this house I

shall certainly regulate its hospitalities."

There was a pause, at the end of which Stanton St. John, Jr., who had been pondering the situation, lifted up his voice quite steadily. "It does n't seem to me, Mrs. Rothery, that you've any right to break off our engagement."

"Really!" replied this lady.

"No, I don't think so," he continued moderately. "You said you could n't sanction it, you know."

Mrs. Rothery was a little startled by the shrewdness of the objection, but answered with a superior smile, "Very well, then; I will write at once to Judge Ford. You won't be disposed, I fancy, to dispute his interdict. By the way," she added, a sudden thought striking her unpleasantly, "does your grandfather know anything of this folly?"

"Not yet, ma'am."

"Then I must earnestly require of you to say nothing to him until I have heard from New York. I have your word, sir?"

Stanton endeavored in vain to steal a look at his companion. "I suppose," he said, reluctantly, "that I might promise for two days. Although I don't think, mind you, Mrs. Rothery, that you have any right to ask it."

"We will waive that. I consider you pledged."
Jane was forced to admit a something reasonable and manly, or at least manlike, in the boy's attitude, but the reflection by no means tempered the acidity of her next words. "And now, Constance, you will retire to your own room, and you, Stanton, I must request to go home."

Both appeared to yield a sufficiently ready compliance. The youth made his bow, and went out across the veranda, turning into that part of his grandfather's driveway which divided the two estates, and was immediately lost to sight behind the tall hemlock hedge. The slow footsteps of Constance were heard at the same time ascending the main staircase, and proceeding to her own room.

"In a minute can lovers exchange a word?" Stanton presently forced his way through the hedge, at a point where it straggled a little, and dropped upon the grass in the densest thicket of Mrs. Rothery's shrubbery, where he remained, shaking his head at intervals in deep perplexity, until he was joined by Constance, who darted into the thicket, like a bird upon the wing, sank down beside him, and said between her soft pantings, "Was n't it fortunate that she did n't add, 'and stop till I come'? She'll be there soon though, and we must hurry. What do you mean to do next?"

Stanton had not got so far. He pursued his meditations aloud, in his own slow fashion, "What a terrible woman!"

"Is she not? She frightens me out of my senses when I'm alone."

"Does the judge always agree with her?"

"Usually, and guardian, too. Ever since we came, Ruthie and I have always had to do exactly what she said."

"By Jove! Then I'm in for it."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember what she let fall about gentlemen? Well, she will send for the judge to come, and between them they'll marry me to Ruth out of hand."

They sat in silent discouragement for a little, while Constance waited for Stanton to recur to her own suggestion of an hour before. Even Constance felt that she could not again be the first to mention

so desperate an alternative. Meanwhile an appalling vision rose before her of the life she would lead, in the event of this forced marriage, with no sister to divide Mrs. Rothery's severity, and no Stanton to amuse her leisure hours. The more practical Stanton was absorbed in the aspect of the actual crisis. At length he spoke.

- "You were right. There's only one way to stop them, and that will."
 - "Oh, Stanton, what?"
 - "What you said just as we went in."
 - "Do you think we really could?"
- "Oh, yes. I know it's very easy, although I don't just know how they manage it."
 - "You must find out, then, instantly."
- "I'll do it this afternoon, and write you a note. How will you get it?"
- "Put it here, under this stone; and I'll come for it."
 - "All right."

She rose to her feet. "But, oh, for pity's sake, don't let anybody suspect."

"Trust me for that, Connie."

Then, waving her hand, the girl turned back by the way she had come, and was ready to receive, with an air of stolid impenitence, Mrs. Rothery's domiciliary visit.

Finding her charge obstinate, Jane resolved to lose no time before arming herself with the full power of the law, and was glad to remember, while dashing off the curtest of letters to Judge Ford, that Ruth's absence with Miss Ingestre might enable her to keep both ladies in ignorance, for the moment at least, of this new and ridiculous complication. Little did she imagine that the elder sister's banishment was depriving the other of a natural safeguard in the hour of her greatest need.

On the following day, having provoked Mrs. Rothery into ordering her to keep her own room until she was ready to offer a suitable apology, Constance retired and locked her door with a malicious little chuckle; and late that evening, when the mistress of the house fancied her in a fair way to contrition, the following words were exchanged between the supposed prisoner and Stanton St. John, Jr., in the shrubbery:—

"Of course we'll say nothing until we're hard pressed, but we're out of their power anyway."

"Yes, and that makes one feel so bold and gay. Perhaps we shall manage without ever telling, Stanton."

"I wish we might. I should rather hate to miss my last year at Harvard."

"It would seem a pity."

"But at all events we're all right. At least I am awfully glad to have it settled, and to know that I've got you sure."

"And I the same."

"Then, Con dear, suppose you give me a kiss."

She complied, ingenuously adding, with an authoritative air, "Not one word more," and hurried away.

There was a clouded moon, and by its pallid light the two stole silently along towards the school-room wing of the cottage. Only an instructed eye would have distinguished a long ladder propped against the ledge of an open window in the sisters' room. This ladder Stanton steadied while Constance nimbly ascended, and effected without noise her entrance into the chamber. Little had Mrs. Rothery anticipated that any such use would be ever made of the agility which her compulsory gymnastics had cultivated!

Once within the room, Constance airily blew forth a farewell kiss, and lowering her windowblinds was lost to Stanton's view.

He waited a few minutes, half hoping that she might reappear, then cautiously removed and balanced upon his stout right arm the slender ladder, which oscillated, as he passed into the darkness, in harmony with his stealthy tread.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. ROTHERY fully intended to make her communication to Judge Ford in a light and goodhumored fashion, and with a half apology for troubling him with such nonsense at all. But finesse was foreign to her instincts and methods, and to tell a part of the truth for the whole, she had ever held and taught to be only less contemptible than lying outright. Still, how could she introduce Ruth's name, or disclose her own absurdly thwarted designs on behalf of that impayable young person? She ended, as moralists of her sternly utilitarian type almost always do, by yielding to the pressure of circumstances, and merely deposed that Constance Curwen and Stanton St. John, Jr., had chosen to consider themselves engaged, and it had seemed to her that the best way effectually to discourage that sort of trifling with serious matters would be to apply to him at once for his official veto.

She had added that she did not care to provoke the children to obstinacy, or flatter them with the notion that they were enduring persecution at her hands, before she perceived, with a fresh access of self-disgust, the inconsistency of this plausible profession with her own angry banishment of Constance to her room. The upshot of it all was, that she accepted a very transparent substitute for an apology on the part of that contumelious damsel; and the outward aspect of affairs at the cottage was the same as usual, except for Ruth's absence, when the morning of the third day brought to its mistress the following answer from Judge Ford:—

NEW YORK, July 11, 1865.

Dear Mrs. Rothery, — Yours of the 9th is received, and its interesting contents noted. I should not think of giving an official opinion on the rather funny affair in question without first communicating with my colleague, to whom I have already written. If I get his answer in season, I will run over for next Sunday and deliver judgment on the spot.

I remain, dear Madam,
Your most ob't servant,
EBENEZER FORD.

Jane was yet frowning over this not very satisfactory missive, when Constance joined her at breakfast. She bade Mrs. Rothery a dutiful good-morning, eying the judge's note meanwhile with an air of demure intelligence which was particularly exasperating, although she asked no questions. Jane was fain to own herself mystified by the manner of her charge. Outwardly submissive, and never so preëminently proper in all her irresponsible young life before, she was evidently buoyed up by an inner sentiment of confidence and

content. Her eyes danced blithely under their decorously lowered lids, and through the would-be gravity of her tones, when she briefly spoke, a ring might be detected like the far-away echo of a peal of elfin laughter.

When informed by Mrs. Rothery, as the latter rose from table, that the judge was coming to them in a few days, Constance received the news without emotion, as well she might, having already heard and fully discussed it an hour before, in the dewy freshness of the early midsummer morning, with Stanton St. John, Jr., over the sill of the schoolroom window.

When the schoolroom wing was added to the cottage, Mrs. Rothery had carefully provided that its windows, while admitting plenty of light, should command no distant and distracting view. They looked upon a space of green turf separated by a rather close plantation from the croquet ground, which was again divided in the same manner from the tradesmen's alley, where the first abortive midnight adventure of the young folks had taken place a year before. Within the safe semicircle of these academic shades, it was easy enough for the rebels to hold communication, and they had done so freely during Mrs. Rothery's busy morning hours, even while the young lady was still nominally in durance.

The fact was, that on the previous day, after inditing his letter to Amory, and his answer to Mrs. Rothery, the judge had indulged himself in a some-

what lengthy telegram to the elder St. John, the reception of which had been followed by a peremptory summons to his grandfather's private sanctum of the younger gentleman of that name.

"And I can tell you I wished I was somewhere else," breathed the new Romeo with all his native candor to the rosy Juliet, who leaned from her low balcony to catch his words. "The sanctum always means mischief, and I made sure pussy was out of the bag. Heaven be praised it was n't that. However he did give me considerable of a wigging."

"O Stanton, what then? Do tell me all about

it quick."

"Why, do you believe that the judge had just telegraphed to grandfather — fancy! it must have cost the old boy a pretty penny! — the whole story; all, I mean, that Mrs. Rothery had written him. And grandfather was mad enough with me for having proposed for you without consulting him; but he was raving, so to speak, - all polite, you know, - with Dame Rothery, because, instead of going to him directly, she had undertaken to write to the judge first. He called it promoting deception. It's not, however, that he has the slightest objection to you, Con dear, except on the score of infancy, and I believe he has written as much as that to Judge Ford. But he says that of course the consent of both your guardians would be necessary to our regular engagement."

"Dear me," observed Constance, "what a bother!

If they only knew!"

Stanton did not immediately respond. He looked — for him — rather worried, but made haste to add, with assumed nonchalance, "Of course, if they consent, it is all straight. But if she has her way — However, the judge is coming on Sunday, and coming to us, which I call a good sign."

It proved unexpectedly so, for the supposed course of true love between Stanton and Constance. The judge arrived on Saturday afternoon, and after a brief but seemingly satisfactory colloquy with his old crony, he waited at once upon Mrs. Rothery, with the staggering information that he himself, Major Wallis, and the elder St. John were alike prepared to sanction the betrothal.

Defeat is always bitter, but to be defeated by so strong, and so unexpected a coalition was more than Mrs. Rothery could bear without remonstrance. "I wonder," she said scornfully, "if any of you have taken into account that the boy and girl in question are both much younger in character than even in years?"

"As to that," replied the judge stoutly, "I believe — religiously — in early marriages. They are about the only ones, to my mind, that offer much chance of happiness under the conditions of modern life. Boy and girl, if you will, when they plight their troth, your boy steps into virility by the act, and your girl into womanhood. It's ballast for him and safety for her. Such "(with a bow) "is my old-fashioned opinion."

"But seventeen and twenty-one!"

"My wife and I were engaged on her sixteenth birthday, when I was nineteen; and we were married in two years, and never either of us regretted it for one instant of our blessed life together."

The old lawyer's voice broke, and Mrs. Rothery was a little softened.

"Your own experience would, of course, have great weight; but surely, Judge Ford, you cannot have failed to remark that girls at least, in these days, are virtually much younger at sixteen than they were a couple of generations ago."

"Excuse me, my dear madam, but I have n't remarked anything of the sort. The dear creatures appear to me exactly as old as their grandmothers were when I first began to adore them."

Mrs. Rothery still constrained herself to argue the case temperately. "That may only prove that the youth of both sexes are more backward now than then. But perhaps," she continued, still baffled in her own logic by the memory of Ruth, "it is as well not to generalize. We will say that these two — Constance and Stanton — are exceptional cases. I doubt if he will ever mature. The simple fact is, that his mental capacity is below the average. But with her the case is very different. She is liable at any time to take on a wholly unexpected development. She will outgrow him to a dead certainty and that soon. Then how will the present arrangement answer?"

In spite of himself and his lack of sympathy with the speaker, the judge was a little impressed. "Well, we don't propose to marry them out of hand," he said somewhat testily. "By permitting an early engagement, we not only give them that chance of growing together, on which I reckon so much, but ample opportunity, provided they have made a mistake, to find out the same before anything disastrous comes of it. You will see, at all events," he added, drawing Amory's letter from his pocket-book, "that such is your brother's opinion. But perhaps you have heard from him directly?"

She had not, but the door opened at that very moment, and a note from Amory was handed in. It was — like all his recent communications — very brief.

ALEXANDRIA, 7-12, '65.

Dear Jane, — Your first impulse will be to oppose this engagement. Pray refrain from doing so by look, word, or deed. When I accepted the charge of Cornelia's daughters, I made and recorded a solemn vow that I would never interfere with the first choice of the heart of either one of them, however preposterous that choice might appear to myself or to the world. You know why I did so, and will respect my motive as well as my request. Excuse the curtness of this. I can apparently compass no style of late but that of the general order for the day. I shall write to Constance to-morrow and to Ruth.

As ever, my dear sister,
Faithfully yours,
A. W.

"Very well," said Jane, as she handed this letter to the judge, in exchange for the one he had proffered her, "I have done. I cannot formally resign my responsibilities, I suppose, until my brother comes; but to all intents and purposes I consider them at an end. Shall I send for Constance, and will you tell her that her fate is decided?"

The judge assented, and the springing step of the girl was presently heard upon the stair. She came in, wearing her archest smile, and with her favorite white Persian cat balanced upon her shoulder. Something in the manner of her elder guardian as he rose to greet her, a species of deference, a touch of compassion, arrested, and for the moment sobered her. She let pussy down softly, and received their guest with unwonted sedateness.

"Well, my child," he said, kissing her forehead, "I bring you good news. You and Stanton have leave of all us old fogies to make one another as happy as you can."

Constance glanced involuntarily at Mrs. Rothery for confirmation of his words, but that lady's face was impenetrable. "You are very kind," she began, slightly bewildered. "Just as you always are," she added more emphatically, giving his hand an affectionate little squeeze. Then, after a moment's pause, with what seemed to the judge a very natural and becoming shyness, "Does Stanton know?"

"He will be here directly," was the cheerful

answer, "with his grandfather, who wants of course to perform his act of adoption with all due ceremony. Don't be alarmed," he added, seeing Constance look more and more solemn, "it will soon be over."

"But Ruth," she observed, after a moment's reflection, and turning again, from force of inveterate habit, towards Mrs. Rothery. "Has anybody told her?"

Jane hated to unclose her lips, but had no choice. "Naturally not. We have all been taken by surprise, as you know. That pleasure will be your own."

"And may I go to her directly? I mean" (as an afterthought) "when Mr. St. John and Stanton have been here?"

"After that," replied the lady, unable to refrain from a sarcastic glance towards their visitor, "you will do exactly as you like."

"Then of course I shall go. But if I may go, why may n't she come home, since it was only on account of the fever that you kept us apart? Although, to be sure," the girl continued provokingly, "there was never any real need of her going, for I did tell you from the first, Mrs. Rothery, only you would not believe me, that Shippie had taken every precaution before she sent me home."

The judge had now to be enlightened concerning the occasion of Constance's abrupt return from New Hampshire, and before the explanation was concluded the two St. Johns appeared. Neither of the young people ever remembered very clearly what passed during the oppressively stiff and formal interview which ensued, and which was supposed to seal the contract that insured their earthly bliss. They were both burning with impatience to have it over, and to get away by themselves; and the judge, who was the first, by virtue of his abounding sympathy with all honest young love, to perceive the fact, good-naturedly favored their intention.

But when their demure exit had been effected, and they had crossed the lawn in silence, and stood face to face under the shelter of the rocks upon the tiny strip of beach, they eyed one another for a few seconds with looks expressive both of merriment and consternation, and then broke, by a simultaneous impulse, into a peal of rather nervous laughter.

Constance was the first to recover herself, and had even the effrontery to inquire, with a warning glance in the direction of the cottage, what Stanton found so droll.

The youth leaned, after an ostentatiously limp and helpless fashion, against a rock for support, reckless of crushing the soft tendrils of its luxuriant woodbine drapery. "I protest," he answered, wiping his eyes after one more paroxysm of laughter, "that it was all too awfully funny. To see their glum faces, hers and grandfather's and the judge's, and her style of quenching the dear old boys when they tried to talk about 'this auspicious occasion,'

and the awkward way in which you stood there looking so dreadfully scared and unhappy, when we were both expected to be frantic with joy."

"I did n't!" cried Constance, offended, "and I

don't like you to call me awkward."

"Well, you're not, in a general way, you know, — not the least in the world. Usually you have cheek enough for anything, and that made it the more remarkable. But this, you see, was what they call an embarrassing situation. I'm sure I felt it so."

Constance's dimples reappeared. "Just fancy if they knew"—

"Exactly! When I think what a jolly row it would make all round, I can hardly hold my tongue. But I shall try. It would be a big mistake to tell, — just now at any rate."

Constance pondered a little. "I wonder," she observed presently, with a speculative and unbiased air, "if we really were a bit silly? We need not, I suppose, have been in such a desperate hurry."

"You were the one to propose it."

"You ought not to be the one to say so."

"That's a fact, my dear, and I beg your pardon; but you know I meant no harm, and really I don't see what else we could have done."

"If we had only waited, everything would have

come right, you see."

"As it happened, but there was very small chance that it would happen in this way. You've

only to look at Mrs. Rothery's face now to see that she never got so badly euchred in all her life before. Even grandfather spoke of her the other day as 'that compulsive woman.' I fancy we did right. 'An ounce of prevention,' you know — Oh, I say, Con, do you remember once repeating that proverb wrong, and how Mrs. Rothery came down on you?"

"I think I do. Did n't I say an ounce of prevention takes a pound of cure, and did not she give me a lecture before a roomful of people on the heinousness of misquotation?"

"Quite so; and when she had finished, you perked up and said that after all you thought your way quite as good as the other."

A sudden gravity overcame the girl's bright face, like the passing shadow of a summer cloud. "What if we were to prove it so?" she said.

"We? How? I don't understand."

"Yes, we, stupid! By what we have done. Even if you never blurt it out, it will be known somehow. He will tell."

"No, he won't, if he knows what's good for himself. There's much more danger of me."

"You own it! Well, then, don't you see that what you have to do is to take the most awful care?"

He wagged his head solemnly. "You're right, and I intend to. But all the same I shall let it out some day. I never kept a secret yet in all my life. Just when I fancy I am holding in with all my might, the thing will slip away."

"You remember it so hard that you forget. I know, for I have done it myself." Constance made this admission magnanimously, but for the space of three seconds she looked positively careworn. Then sunshine revisited her brow. "I have thought it out," she announced; "we must ourselves forget the whole thing, — once for all."

"Forget such a spree as that!" he expostulated.

"Oh, come now!"

"We ought to be able by fixing our minds upon it."

"That, I should say, would be the way to drive it in."

"Mrs. Rothery says the memory is as much under the control of the will as any other faculty."

"Hers may be, but I'll be hanged if mine is."

"Still we might try to do as I have said."

"Try it is, then."

"And to begin we must stop talking of it, even to one another, and every time we remember it we must say to ourselves, 'That was a dream. I did n't do it.'"

"Does that seem the straight thing?"

"It would not if we denied it to anybody else, but with ourselves I cannot see that it counts."

"Maybe not," Stanton answered meekly, for he felt himself to be out of his depth among such subtleties.

"And all we shall have to do, luckily, will be to keep up exactly the behavior that they'll expect of us." "Uncommon easy that," said Stanton, bestowing an audacious kiss or two on his half-reluctant companion. "And one of these days we will wind up properly with a swell wedding, — floral bells, and favors, and all that sort of thing. You'll look well, my dear, with a tail to your gown five yards long."

"Trains (not tails; that is vulgar) are never five yards long,"

"They will be by that time, I dare say."

"A wedding-gown is nice enough," observed Constance calmly. "It can be worn to parties afterwards with colored flowers. But I would never wear mine until it was filthy and frowsy, as they say some brides do."

"No more you shall: I'll get you a new one, if it costs me a coat. I used to wonder," Stanton continued, "how a fellow ever could stand up before a mob of people and be married, but I don't know that I should mind it, now that I've"— He hesitated for the word, and Constance promptly supplied it.

"Rehearsed. That is what we will call it, won't we?"

"You're a clever girl!" he cried, and clasping her slender waist, he wheeled her along the sands, and half way up the lawn, shouting, to the waltz-tune then in vogue, "Re—hearse, hearse, hearse, hearse!"

The three elders heard them as they stepped out upon the veranda, for the gentlemen were al-

ready taking leave. Even the latter, though so determined to be pleased, were a little shocked by such extremely kittenish behavior on the part of a newly affianced pair.

"What's that they're singing?" asked the judge, indulgently; then, as the syllable became distinctly audible, his face fell. "A gruesome re-

frain," he added. "Absit omen."

CHAPTER XVII.

CONSTANCE had spoken boldly, on the spur of the moment, of informing Ruth without delay of the sudden change in her own position. But when she came to consider in what words she might best make known to her serious and unsuspecting elder the startling fact of an openly recognized betrothal between herself and her playmate Stanton, she found the matter beset with difficulties and embarrassments. It was all very well to silence first the docile Stanton by her commands, and then her private misgivings by the reflection that the whole thing had been done for Ruth's own sake, to save her from falling an unresisting prey to Mrs. Rothery's tyranny. What Ruth would feel if she knew this, — above all, what she would say to the means which had been employed by the conspirators to secure their magnanimous end, - was more than even the dauntless Constance dared contemplate. While she yet waltzed with her lover across the lawn, she was beginning ruefully to realize what the constraint would be of feeling that she could not under any circumstances tell all, - even to her own Ruthie. Moreover, did not the unexpected ease with which Mrs. Rothery had actually been defeated, show plainly that there had been no need whatever of resorting to heroic measures?

Jane, on her part, now that the affair had been so signally taken out of her hands, was vexed with herself for having confided her own previous intentions to Estelle, and chiefly concerned for the moment that that impulsive lady should not betray her when she heard the news. The foolish and ill-omened story must be told at once, however, for Amory had promised to write to Ruth, and the judge was on hand, and Estelle herself might at any moment appear.

Mrs. Rothery therefore observed gravely to the gentlemen, when they rose to depart, that since it seemed to be thought a superfluous precaution on her part to have separated the sisters, for fear of the fever, and the danger, if any, was now indeed in all probability past, she would herself drive over to Miss Ingestre's that evening, announce the engagement, and arrange for Ruth's return on the following day. She hoped they would all dine with her informally on the Sunday evening. The invitation was accepted, and the plenipotentiaries then took leave.

Constance and Stanton saw them go. The pair had finally ensconced themselves in the remotest corner of the veranda, and had been sitting side by side for a few minutes, remarkably at a loss for conversation, but now the *fiancé* was frankly informed that he had better follow his elders. He seemed well enough inclined to do so, but he hesitated.

"Are you sure she won't take it out on you, when you two are alone?" he chivalrously inquired.

"I don't think so; and what if she does? What can she do to us now? Go, please, there's a good boy! I want to think about Ruth."

"Yes, yes, exactly! He, he! Won't Ruth open her big eyes? Oh, I say, Connie, hurrah for

you and me!"

Constance nodded and smiled, but waved him off imperiously, and the fruit of her cogitations appeared when Mrs. Rothery drew near, and made a proposal to drive with her to Miss Ingestre's. To Jane's astonishment the girl hesitated a little, and then said quite meekly: "Thank you so much, Mrs. Rothery! It's very good of you; but if you don't mind, I wish you would go without me. You will know so much better what to say; and I shall have Ruth back to-morrow."

"As you please." It would simplify the matter very much to go alone, and be able to tell her story in her own way, but what had come to Constance? Could it be the softening influence of the tender passion? Mrs. Rothery would not and did not believe it.

As she guided her gaunt pony between the flower and vine bedecked pillars of the gateway which opened upon Miss Ingestre's extensive grounds, she met the young English "priest," of whose advent Ruth had written to her sister, going out. Mrs. Rothery had favored this apostolic personage with very little of her attention on the rare occasions when they had met, but to-night his appearance impressed her strangely. His long

black figure loomed suddenly out of the summer dusk: he was pacing slowly in a deep reverie, and his remarkably handsome, but bloodless and emaciated features wore a positively tragical expression of conflict and distress. He started violently at Mrs. Rothery's apparition, and as he touched, with the ready action of a man of the world, his limp and mortified hat, she thought he colored slightly.

She found Estelle alone in her little blue boudoir, quenched the affectionate effusion of her greeting by the statement that she had come on business, and proceeded forthwith to communicate her intelligence.

Estelle heard her with fixed attention, remained silent for two or three breathless moments, and then ejaculated with pious energy, "Heaven be

praised!"

Jane very slightly lifted both her shoulders and her brows. "And why, if you please?" was her calm inquiry. "Acquiescence in the divine will is all very well, but this is neither the will of God, nor even, primarily, the will of man. It is the weak indulgence of a perverse freak on the part of two silly and headstrong children."

"To tell the truth, I was not thinking of them for the moment, but naturally, as I always do first, of my sweet Ruth and her escape from your machinations, my dear Jane. Constance is unformed, I grant you; and I think that her manners deteriorated sadly while she was living with that pretentious nurse of theirs, and among those rustic peo-

ple. But Stanton is an incurable boor himself, and anyway it won't do for you to talk about 'two children' to me, Jane. However, I am beginning to think — I should have kept my thoughts to myself a while longer if you had not come with this surprising story, but now I may as well tell you: I half fancy that there may be a happier destiny in store for our Ruth than any we have ever imagined for her. The suspicion has crossed my mind two or three times before, and to-night it has been greatly strengthened, that that holy young man, Mr. Morecumbe, may have more than a director's interest in our angelic girl."

Jane remembered the look which she had surprised upon his face in the avenue, and observed disdainfully, "I thought he was a brother of some-

thing."

"Oh, no, not yet. There is talk of establishing a brotherhood at St. Birinus's, and he had intended to take vows. But of course he would never do it without a clear vocation, and if he is in love with Ruth he can't have a vocation, don't you see."

"I fancy that's the way they usually argue," was the dry response, "in your make-believe church at least. Have you, with your remarkable discernment in such matters, any reason as yet to suppose that she takes more than a penitent's interest in him? But a truce to such nonsense. Won't you be so good, Estelle, as to send for Ruth, for I must not stay late. She is to come home to-morrow, you know, and I'd like you to bring her, and then stay

yourself and dine. I must depend on your loquacity - excuse me! - for keeping up the ball with those two doting old gentlemen, for really they try my patience almost too far."

In the chamber of the sisters, at five P. M. on Sunday, the Venetian blinds were closed to exclude the strong afternoon sunshine, and, Constance, wearing a ruffled white peignoir, which gave her a peculiarly doll-like appearance, was ensconced in a low arm-chair beside the central window, gazing fixedly between the apertures of the blind, and wearing, to outward appearance, an expression exactly as romantic and dreamy as might have been expected of a young lady in her position.

So, at least, it seemed to Ruth, as, opening the door softly and almost timidly, she surprised the abstracted maiden. Constance gave a start, while Ruth burried forward and folded her in her arms. "My darling Con," she said with wonderful sweetness, "I don't know what to say, - except that it makes me happier than I ever was before, to know that you are so happy."

Constance fairly hung her head. "Oh, Ruthie, how good you are! Anybody else would have been vexed to have such a thing sprung upon one, — to be told last of all, - you, who are the nearest and dearest! And always will be," she added rather

fiercely.

"No, no," Ruth cried, with her low, rare laugh, and eyes that beamed all the brighter for a suspicion of moisture in them, "I shall not be the nearest any more, and I ought not to be. It's quite right; and as for telling me, why, I fancy that you hardly knew yourself until the very last moment. It must have come quite suddenly, both upon you and Stanton, that you cared all the world for one another! Such things do come suddenly"—

"Oh, Ruthie, how can you know?"

It was Ruth's turn to show a trace of embarrassment, but she answered archly, "They say so, people and books, I mean." She stooped once more, and kissed her sister two or three times, and there was a play and sparkle in her beautiful face such as Constance had not seen there for a long time, and which moved the little one to enthusiastic admiration.

"I wonder Stanton or anybody else can ever look at me when you are by," she observed naïvely.

"Nonsense, baby mine! but no, I must not call you baby any more. You'll have to be a woman now, Con dear, and you may fancy how old it makes me feel to have a younger sister engaged."

"Yes, you look so! It's very odd," Constance added, "how much you and guardian talk alike. I had the dearest letter from him this morning. I wonder where it is;" and she instituted a flying search round the chamber, which resulted in the discovery of the missing document upon the toilet table. "You heard, too, did you not?" she said as she handed the letter to Ruth. "Let me see yours."

"I have n't it here. Forgive me!" Ruth colored, and spoke hurriedly, but still in the same gay and tender fashion, so unlike the staid manner which she had cultivated of late, that Constance was fairly amazed.

"Oh, Ruthie!" she cried, after a moment's inspection of the other; "why are you not always like this? You're usually an angel, you know, but to-day you are sweeter than I ever saw you — and pretty! — Pretty's no word for it! I say, sister, will you do something to please me? Just to celebrate this day, you know?"

"If I can, surely."

"Oh, you can! Easier than not! Let us dress alike for once at dinner to-night, — just as we always used. Let us wear our lovely embroidered muslins, the ones Miss Ingestre sent for from Paris last year, before you took this gloomy turn; and those exquisite Greek scarfs for sashes! I'll wear the red-and-gold one with red flowers, and you shall wear the cream-and-silver with tea roses. Please, dearest!" and Constance clasped her hands.

Ruth hesitated and looked distressed. She had long since yielded her black serge to the exigencies of the season, as Mrs. Rothery had foreseen that she would be forced to do; and she had even come, not without help, it must be confessed, from her young "director," to feel a little ashamed of it, as a premature affectation of singularity. And still the promise to Heaven and to herself, of which her austere dress was the seal, she felt to be binding

upon her before all other obligations, and she had worn only plain white all summer, without a touch of color, or a trace of ornament. Yet it certainly did seem selfish and unnatural to disappoint Connie on so very special an occasion, and so, with a vague thought of future penance, Ruth yielded.

She stole only one furtive look at herself in the glass after Constance had fastened her flowers, and was executing around the triumph of her taste a dance of generous ecstasy. Ruth felt abashed, almost terrified, by the radiance of her own looks. "Oh, I am beautiful! I am beautiful!" the spirit of candor cried out within her. "How shall I bear it? How shall I keep my purpose?" Then the high tide of unwontedly happy feeling, by whose gentle play even the volatile Constance had been struck and fascinated, swelled once more within her, and when the two sisters entered the drawing-room together — a little late, for all the guests were assembled — it would have been hard to say which wore the brighter face.

The two old men and the young one sprang simultaneously to their feet to do homage to the fair twin vision. It was the etiquette of the occasion, of course, and it need hardly be said that the elder St. John set the example of scrupulously observing it, that the younger should be greeted first; but it was the elder to whom the eyes of all continually returned, even those of the ingenuous fiancé himself.

Miss Ingestre and Mrs. Rothery were sitting

upon the same sofa when the girls came in, the copious azure draperies of the very grandest of all the celestial full toilettes of the former overflowing, and all but extinguishing the dim outlines of Jane's dark-brown silk. Estelle dropped her Watteau fan, clasped her small gloved hands, and would have given audible expression to the emotions of rapture excited by Ruth's brilliant appearance, had she not been fairly awed into silence by the most imperious frown that even her hostess could command. Then the Watteau fan went up to its owner's lips, and she whispered behind it: "I am taken utterly by surprise, but is she not entrancing? Now, Jane, what do you think of what I hinted to you last evening?"

"I don't remember what it was," replied Jane, crossly and not quite candidly, scorning to whisper, although she dropped her voice; "but you'll oblige me once more and very particularly, Estelle, by taking no notice whatever of this new freak of Ruth's. It is a freak, just like the other. She was tired of being dowdy, that's all, and could not stand seeing Constance put to the fore. Very like a girl, and not in the least like an angel. I won't have it noticed, I say." Jane had quite forgotten for the moment her abdication of yesterday.

"Well, I think you are very hard, as usual, upon a very saintly young creature. But I also think, and shall think until events disprove it, that this most lovely and becoming new departure of Ruth's means that she may be inclining to reward

Mr. Morecumbe's devotion, and that neither of them will quit the world."

"Quit the fiddlesticks! There is dinner at last! Will you be prudent, Estelle?"

The elder St. John took Constance in, and the judge escorted Estelle, and Stanton walked between Mrs. Rothery and Ruth, a little sheepishly, edging away from the former, and stealing glances at the latter of mingled admiration and awe.

"Oh, I say, Con," he observed to his betrothed when dinner was over, and the whole party was moving toward the moonlit lawn, "is n't Ruth a screamer? If I had realized how much handsomer she is than you, I don't know that I should ever"—

"Oh, yes, you would," replied Constance airily. "Under the circumstances, you know. And I don't in the least mind your thinking Ruth handsomer than I. Indeed, you would be very bête, as Miss Ingestre says, if you did not. But he ought not to say so to me outright, ought he, Mr. St. John?" appealing suddenly to the grandfather.

"What error has my blundering boy committed now?"

"Why, he tells me in so many words, to-night of all nights, that he likes Ruth's looks better than mine."

"He's a discerning young gentleman indeed if he can decide between you," cried the judge gallantly; and Constance told Stanton, amid the laughter of the whole group, that that was the way gentlemen talked, and she hoped he'd take a lesson.

"There is just one thing needed," the judge went on, addressing himself to Estelle, "to complete the happiness of this occasion, and that would be to have my colleague here; but he will soon be among us now."

"And if he is n't proud of his girls, Judge Ford," continued the enthusiastic little lady, "we'll send him off again. How a man of any artistic sense—and Amory, you know, used to be steeped in it—can help being simply transfixed by Ruth"—

Ruth was standing a little apart from the rest, and might not have heard, but the searching eye of Mrs. Rothery perceived, even by the pale moonlight, that her face changed, and she thought, with a fresh access of contempt and incredulity, of Estelle's last projected romance. "No such good luck," Jane said to herself, with a grim presentiment of something far more serious.

"You were the belle, Ruthie," said Constance warmly, when the sisters were once more together in their own room. "You were out and out the belle, and so you will be when we go to parties next winter, and I shall be glad of it. And I thank you, dear, for making yourself pretty tonight to please me, and now I have just one thing more to ask"—

Ruth looked at her half deprecatingly. "Dear Connie," she murmured, stroking the other's cheek, "you have such a noble heart."

- "Well, then, dearest, will you promise?"
- "How can I until I know?"
- "Will you promise to wear the same things you wore to-night the first evening after Guardian comes home?"

Ruth shrank like one who feels a spasm of pain. "I could n't, sister," she cried almost wildly. "Not then. Oh, please, if you really love me, do not ask it again."

CHAPTER XVIII.

One hot morning a few weeks later, Judge Ford was trudging slowly down the shady side of Broadway toward his office, where he still felt more entirely at home than in the hotel apartment to which a portion of his household gods had been removed on the final dismantling of his old home. He got a good many cordial and respectful greetings as he went on, and returned them heartily. It was a very fortunate life upon the whole - arduous, but, in the best sense of the word, successful — which was drawing to a close in his now venerable person. "And that which should accompany old age, as honor, love, obedience, troops of friends," was with him in no common measure. In particular was his name known and revered by soldiers of every degree for his obstinate and invincible patriotism; and he was one of the few non-combatants, who were held, by those who had stayed and suffered in the field, to have sustained as mightily by his stout words as they by their stout arms the sacred cause of national unity. Military salutes were showered upon him whenever he took his walks abroad, the great majority of which tributes he returned with only a broad and genial smile, and an emphatic but unrecognizing nod; and he was doing the like this morning, in answer to the touch of a tall, thin officer of uncommonly fine carriage, with close-cropped hair, grizzled moustache, and deeply sun-browned features, when suddenly,—

"As I live, Judge Ford," said the officer pulling off his glove, and extending his hand: "you don't know me!"

"Good Lord in heaven, it's Major Wallis!" The hand was seized and wrung violently. Then the old man laughed and laughed again, that there might be no doubt whatever about the source of the moisture which he felt to be dimming his eyes; but such scenes were too common upon the streets in those days to attract attention.

"No, I did not know you," he deposed, as he wiped the tears away. "Who would? Such a fine figure of a swash-buckler as you're turned into! But come along into my place, for God's sake! Dear, dear! And I, who always plumed myself on being up to all manner of disguises!"

"Well," Amory said, when the two were seated at last in the judge's little private room, "I don't feel much like the fellow you knew first, that is true, but I'd no idea that I'd lost every atom of my old semblance."

"Pretty much, pretty much!" the judge insisted maliciously, "and I'm glad of it. You were too handsome by half, three years ago! A man whose next duty it will be to marry off his wards—and one of them engaged already!—ought at least to have brushed away the dew of his own youth."

The slightly ironical smile that curled Amory's lip was visible under the screen of his moustache, and he made no protestations. "Now tell me," was all he said, "what sort of a fellow is this

young St. John?"

"Thoroughly good, clean, honest, warm-hearted boy. Brains enough to play a man's part in everyday life, — and none to spare; and muscle enough to hit out straight at anybody who insults him or his, which I call a first-rate endowment for a youth in his position; good old English stock as any we have; finally, Mr. Major, he's the undisputed heir to a round million of money. Come now!"

"And little Constance is thoroughly in love

with him?"

"Oh yes, in a good, gay little girl's healthy and merry fashion. They're not in the least sentimental, either of them, if that's what you mean; it's not in their line; neither is it, by what I can see, the mode of the day. Meno malo, as the Italians say. They'll marry young, — as soon as the young man has been pushed and pulled through Harvard; and old St. John, a noble old soul, though a bit pompous in his ways, will take them home and give them his blessing, and a handsome allowance till he dies. My opinion is that we've done an excellent piece of work among us here while you have been laying about you in the wars!"

"Well, then," said Amory, with the flicker in his eyes of another hidden smile, "so far, so good. It really seems as though you must be right. And

now, judge, tell me something about Ruth."

The elder of the two guardians pondered for a few seconds, and then slightly shook his head. "No," he said slowly, "I don't think I will. You go and see Miss Curwen for yourself, and see how she strikes you. Hers is the sort of case about which I've no confidence in my own judgment."

"How do you mean? You speak as though something ailed her."

"Oh, no, no! Far from it! She's as blooming as a rose, and in better spiritual health, very likely, than all the rest of us. And still - somehow — the thing that staggers me, Major Wallis, is this: there must be a reason for it, it's so d-d unnatural."

"You mean her very religious turn?"

The judge nodded. "I'm not questioning her sincerity, mind you," he hastened to say. "Heaven forbid that I should do that! I'm afraid, in fact, that she's only too sincere. A light attack of that sort of thing may do the constitution no harm. I don't think, for instance, that it will hurt that skyblue spinster who is always diddling around."

"Fie, fie, sir! Be respectful. Estelle is a great friend of mine, and an excellent woman. I understood that she had turned dévote in the Anglican sense, but, as you justly observe, it can hardly harm her! You were speaking of Ruth. Go on!"

"All I intended to say was, one can never feel sure, in the case of a tender young soul like that, that the thing won't strike in."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, she dresses like a nun already, and—But there, I'll say no more. You go and see for yourself. And see what you think of that precious young 'priest' to whom both she and Bluey are said to confess. I've caught only occasional glimpses of his long skirts myself, and I'll say for him that he does n't seem to have fattened much on Miss Ingestre's petting. On the contrary, I suspect that he, too, is one of the tragic kind, and that's why—But do you go and see!"

"I'm going by the evening train."

"Do they expect you?"

"Not precisely to-day. They have only known for a week, like yourself, that I may be looked for about this time, like a tempest in the Farmer's Almanac. I could not have been more explicit until yesterday, and I thought I would not telegraph."

"Just as well! And now we must talk lawsuits and investments for a little, and then you'll lunch with me and tell me some war stories."

Amory shook his head. "Business, of course, and a lunch at Delmonico's with all my heart; but soldiers' yarns? No, not at present, and I fancy never. The thing is over, thank God, and we hope the right has won; but one's a little ashamed of having come out of it when one thinks of the men who are gone; and at all events that leaf must be turned. Maybe it's only the last rag of my old fastidiousness, but so it is."

He made no profession of his intent to atone for

his long absence by throwing himself zealously into the technical duties of his guardianship, and relieving as far as possible the stout old shoulders which had carried a double burden so long; but the judge admired, at every turn of the discussion which ensued, the alertness of mind which his colleague displayed, his practical acumen, and simple soundness of judgment. For the first time in threescore and fifteen years, the old man experienced the relief of feeling that he had something to lean upon and could lean, but 'My young friend' he could say no longer. Amory's charm of manner was perennial, but at forty-two he looked every one of his years.

When the two men parted in the late afternoon, the elder observed that it would be but for a short time in any case, since he had promised to spend the month of September at the St. John villa, where there would be abundant leisure and opportunity for saying all which that day had been left unsaid. So they shook hands, if possible even more warmly than ever; and Amory, disdaining a "sleeper," ensconced himself in the centre of a long and happily not over-crowded car, quite undisturbed by the miscellaneous character of his fellow-passengers. They were fortunately unanimous in their preference for wide-open windows during the sultry summer night, and Amory sat by his, erect and wakeful, and mechanically endeavoring to make out the features of the familiar landscape, disguised as they were by the always weird light of a dimly waning moon. His thoughts ran back - inevitably - to the night preceding his departure, almost three years before. The phantom which had seemed to reproach him then for faithlessness to the trust which had been reposed in him, the phantom of so many years of dreams, came back, but its face was veiled, like that of the level world under the low yellow light, and it seemed to speak to him in an unknown tongue. The phantom - nay, there were two! - twin figures with clasped hands, who appeared to breathe by a common act of respiration; and — oh, stranger yet, and awful as well they were two when the breasts rose under their muffling, misty drapery, and only one when they sank again! They pulsed evenly back and forth, between duality and identity, for what seemed a long time, still murmuring the same incomprehensible word. Why would they not talk some language that he knew? They — it — Amory started violently, and realized that, as often in the saddle, he had slept and dreamed.

By good luck he was not recognized, either on his arrival in Boston, or while crossing the city in the cool of the very early morning, when only the workers were awake, nor when, having caught the first outward-bound train, he descended at the shore. Leaving his luggage to be called for, he started to walk to villa-land by a field-path just above the beach, which had been a favorite pacing-place of his in days gone by. He found the path transformed by the unlooked-for opulence and bud-

ding enterprise of the last years of the civil war into a gaunt, graveled promenade, flanked by a light iron railing on the seaward side, and on the other by a continuous flower-bed, gorgeous with nasturtiums, pelargoniums, and other vivid flowers of the late summer. Scores of new villas and cottages had also sprung up, some of them of a rather flamboyant style of architecture; and the sea itself looked more sophisticated than of old, by the increased number of steam-yachts and smaller craft in sight, which were palpably rigged for pleasure. But the greatest change of all was on the pretty wooded point which constituted the hither arm of the home bay, the entire curve of which comprised Estelle's estate and his own, and the St. John property, beside several others.

There a small Gothic belfry reared itself above the spires of the cedars, and presently the lightest and most fairy-like of lych-gates was revealed, leading from the new promenade into a space of green turf, most carefully cut and kept, in the centre of which, and picturesquely relieved against a background of evergreens, St. Birinus stood confessed.

Amory paused involuntarily in order to regard this new feature of the shore from a proper focus, and while he did so it became evident that an early service had been going on within the edifice, and was now concluded, for several fashionably dressed ladies came out, with prayer-books in their hands, and then about the same number of poor women; and finally two tall, slim figures, one white and one black, emerged from the shadow of the porch, and lingered for a moment side by side, engaged apparently in deep conversation, under the lych-gate.

Amory had been hit by a bullet once or twice, and he knew the ominous dull sensation. Something had happened to him which might possibly be fatal, but meanwhile the habit, long so entirely foreign, of acting before taking cognizance of his feelings, had been formed at last, and firmly fixed. Half a dozen swift strides brought him face to face with the two, whom he interrupted without scruple. The clergyman started back at so plainly warlike an apparition, the lady—

Like a delicate, translucent globe of the rarest workmanship, which reveals externally only faint and confused suggestions of some fair design wrought into its substance, but which, if a light be kindled inside it, bursts suddenly into complete symmetrical and speaking beauty, so did Ruth's face change. A rosy flush surged over the madonna-like features, the deep eyes opened in a sort of rapture, the hands were outstretched with a tremulous cry of, "Guardian!"

Amory seized the slender hands with a sense of unspeakable blessedness in the perception that she had known him instantly, and had been so glad, and he kissed her twice upon the forehead, in utter oblivion of the third person under the lych-gate. It was Ruth who regained almost instantly a sweet and courteous self-possession.

"It is my guardian, Major Wallis, who has been gone so long," she said, turning to the clergyman; "and this"—to Amory—"is Mr. Morecumbe, of whom I have sometimes written."

The two men exchanged salutes, and Mr. More-cumbe constrained himself to murmur a few indistinguishable words of congratulation; then, turning to Ruth, "I will go, Miss Curwen," he said, "and see that poor creature of whom you have told me, this very day, and you will perhaps send to my lodgings in the town the comforts you have prepared for her." And lifting his hat a second time, he turned away.

"Sit down for a moment," Amory said gently, "and let me look at you, and then we will walk home together."

Ruth assented in silence, her lip still quivering with an exquisite smile. She had withdrawn her hands from his, and clasped them, as it seemed involuntarily, and he knew by the unconscious motion of her lips that she was saying a little form of thanksgiving for his return. Her beauty at that moment seemed to him something supernatural. He drew a deep breath as he looked at her, and a thousand old and new sensations awoke within him, fusing themselves rapidly into one. He did not speak again, but waited until she had sunk upon the bench under the lych-gate, and then placed himself beside her, not too near, for he was penetrated by a sense of something sacred in the white blossom of her fully unfolded womanhood.

"We ought not to linger," she observed presently, like one who rouses herself resolutely from some happy trance; "we ought to hasten to Connie and the rest."

He did not move. "All are well?" he said inquiringly.

"Oh, yes."

"Tell me a little about Connie before we go.

She is happy? You are happy about her?"

"Connie is always so happy! Not grave like me! And, now of course they have their choice, both she and Stanton and everybody approves, and all seems right and easy. Why should she not be happy?"

"And you think him worthy?"

"Why — yes." Tiny dimples appeared in Ruth's fair cheeks again and she laughed softly. "He is very droll," she admitted, "very simple, but very good, I am sure." Then, with a certain sweet decision, she rose; and Amory, of course, rose, too. "Do you suppose," he inquired, as they slowly made their way to the flight of rustic steps which led from the level of the chapel to the level of the shore, "that Jane and Constance will know me at once, as you did? It was a little childish of me, perhaps, to surprise you, but after Judge Ford failed to recognize me in Broadway"—

Ruth flashed her dark eyes upon him for one instant, and her color glowed. "Not know you," she began with vehemence; "I should have known"—Then she paused, and finished calmly. "There are

changes, of course, Guardian. You have had such hardship and exposure; but I don't see how it would be possible to make a mistake."

"I fancy we must be altered, too," she went on presently, "Con and I. We are 'grown up,' as they call it, since you went away."

He could have told her, if he would, of the extraordinary association at once of likeness and of contrast, which persisted in his brain, between the stormy splendor of her mother's early semblance and her own serene brightness of aspect; that she seemed to him changed indeed, but rather as Beatrice was changed to Dante when he saw her in Paradise; and that it would hardly have surprised him to see her lift her lucid orbs from his, and fix them on the morning sun.

Her soft outward composure was not broken again, but when he stepped forward to assist her down the last grades of the rustic stair aforesaid, he could perceive that her hand still trembled.

CHAPTER XIX.

Amory's return occasioned very little outward excitement. Jane recognized and silently accepted the change in him, which she had already divined from the concise and matter-of-fact character of his later correspondence. Her severe taste approved the simple manliness of his bearing, and the frankly middle-aged aspect of his person; yet there mingled perhaps with her theoretic satisfaction at the apparent demise of the old Amory a grain of despite as the conviction grew upon her that this grizzled and reticent soldier could never again be her tool. She was thus confirmed in the line which she had wrathfully taken when the engagement of Constance and Stanton was officially recognized, and withdrew more and more decidedly from the family councils, and from the exercise of all save her undisputed authority over the dependants of the cottage household and their various activities.

Inveterate habit made her still, to a certain extent, confidential with Estelle, or rather it led her to receive, with no more than an occasional snort of impatience, the voluble outpourings of that fair lady's own emotions as awakened by the new situation.

In all her life — so thought Jane, and such

other of Estelle's friends as found leisure to observe her - Miss Ingestre had never been so absurd before. She openly and piteously bewailed Amory's lost youth and faded beauty, and spoke of the change as placing an immeasurable gulf between that veteran and herself. With Amory, when she found that he no longer went regularly to church, she became eloquent on the score of his spiritual interests, chiefly treating him, more or less, as a hoary sinner, and calling his attention to the beauty of early holiness as exemplified in Ruth and Mr. Morecumbe. At this point she would usually shake her blonde curls, and remark mysteriously that she hardly knew how they would reconcile their intense mutual sympathy with the separate vows of self-sacrifice and mortification which she had reason to believe they both had taken. Amory made no comment, but heard her always with grave and ceremonious attention.

His coming had, of course, the effect of diverting general attention somewhat from the youthful fiancées, who amused him a good deal by their open and unromantic ways with one another and the world, but whom his own growing preoccupation, with a more personal interest, disposed him to take easily at the indulgent valuation of the rest of the seaside circle.

Himself punctiliously polite, though without that flourish of deportment which characterized the elder St. John, Amory was not a little amazed and shocked at times by the manners of the two young people, or rather, considering the discipline to which each had been subjected, Stanton under his grandfather, and Constance under Jane, at their unabashed innocence of any manners whatever. Then he reflected that they were the children of a new time, and instances already, perhaps, of the revolt from over-training; and about Constance, who was really the worse of the two, there was a fitful brightness and an elfish grace which he found entirely disarming.

"You're that cocky, you know," Stanton had observed to his betrothed one day; and, asking pardon of the purists, the girl's behavior, in the early part of that autumn, could hardly have been more accurately described. She blandly patronized the whole world, not excepting her lover, to whom, however, she graciously assigned a position analogous to that of prince consort. "It seems to me, and Stanton thinks so, too," was her favorite introductory formula in those days; and she freely proffered their joint opinion on all subjects, whether of public or of private interest.

By and by, somewhat to the consternation of every one, Constance took a speculative turn, and became prone to exercise upon the gravest matters the tricksy agilities of her nimble intellect, and to put in her piquant and audacious word whenever the conversation took a serious turn. Hints were thrown out that she and Stanton dissented entirely from the religious opinions of some of their elders, and were preparing to astonish the world as soon as they should have attained their full majority. Constance was not slow to perceive — when was she ever slow to perceive anything? — that she had it in her power considerably to embarrass her newly returned guardian by taking for granted his entire sympathy with the liberal movement of Stanton and herself, and she revelled in the advantage it gave her.

One Saturday evening in September, after Judge Ford had come for his visit to the villa, and when the two guardians were peacefully smoking together on the cottage veranda, Constance joined them with the announcement that she had something serious to say.

Both the men laughed, and the judge, whom the girl tickled immensely, cordially invited her to free her mind.

Constance pouted. "I don't know what you are laughing at," she said. "You would not if it were Ruth."

Amory gave her a quizzical glance, and slightly shook his head.

"And I don't see why I'm not entitled to at least equal consideration."

"Certainly you are," averred the judge; "never mind him" (nodding at Amory); "it's I who am your true friend. Tell me."

"You are laughing at me, too," said Constance, dropping her dignity, and shaking her small fist at the lawyer; "but it's very important, as you will soon see. It is about attending church. I do not wish to go to St. Birinus' any more; need I?"

"This is a weighty matter indeed!" and the old man assumed a look of deep concern. "Your reasons, miss?"

"It is altogether against my conscience."

"Whew!" said the judge, who was himself a steady-going, low-church Episcopalian. Then, more soberly: "Take my advice, Connie, and leave the mysteries of faith alone, at least until after you're married."

"It is not the faith so much," replied the young protestant consequentially, "although I can by no means accept the creed,—either of the creeds. I'm not even a Trinitarian any longer, and Stanton is n't either. Still we think it good to have some form of worship, and the Prayer-Book is so beautiful that it seems better to retain it on the whole. A quite low church is what we would prefer, for we intend to go to service rather often, for the sake of the example."

For his life the judge could not help chuckling at this, and stealing a look at his junior, who, however, had perfectly preserved his own countenance, and was indeed regarding the fluent speaker with close and rather grave attention. His expression seemed almost to rebuke the levity of the elder man, who said, a little testily: "Well, Major, what do you say to this case of conscience?"

"It is one which you are much more competent to decide than I, sir," was the urbane answer; then, turning to the petitioner, "It strikes me, Connie," he added, pleasantly enough, "that you might as well continue to go to church with your sister, at least until you and Stanton set up that exemplary establishment of yours."

Constance instantly resented the sarcasm. "You might understand me if you would," she said, with a flash of her bright eyes, "but you do not choose. Dear Judge, I appeal to you. I assure you that you do not in the least know what it is like, the way they dress up, and the — the performances one has to go through."

The judge turned to Amory and lifted his eyebrows inquiringly.

"It's rather 'higher' than anything you have been accustomed to, that's all," said the latter quietly. "Perhaps it would be better for you to go with the girls to-morrow and see for yourself."

"Do so," cried Constance eagerly. "That is all I ask."

Ruth had been out in the early morning as usual, and Constance was left to be the old man's sole escort at ten o'clock.

She chasséed with ill-concealed impatience at the top of the long flight of steps which Amory and Ruth had descended together on the day of his arrival, while the judge mounted slowly, arriving a good deal blown, and somewhat scandalized by the irreverent attitude of his light-minded guide. "I'll stop here," he said, "while you put on your go-to-meeting gloves;" for Constance had pulled off, and thrust into the pocket of her gown, the dilapidated pair which she had worn upon their walk, and her shapely little hands were bare.

"Oh, we must n't wear gloves here," responded Constance, demurely. "Take off your own, please! And we must not sit together either, as of course you know; but I will keep as near you as possible, sir—just across the aisle!"

So the judge was given a flag-bottomed chair among the rare masculine worshipers, and his companion chose a seat in the feminine quarter, whence she had her elder guardian well within sight and sound. The upshot of the adventure was rehearsed to Stanton in the afternoon with gleeful gusto.

"I knew it was all right from the moment old Mrs. Merryweather came in - Do you know, Stan, what one is supposed to curtsey to there before one sits down? But no matter. It is only that Mrs. Merryweather seems to fill the whole place when she dips. It's like a ship going down with sails all set! She's so big, you know, and seems to wear so many more clothes than most people! And she settles so slowly, with such a rustle and creak! I always think, for a moment, that she will never get up again! Well, when the judge saw her he began, under his breath, of course, but I could hear him distinctly, 'Phew! phew!' And when they lighted the candles he made the same noise, and when they swung the censers he blew his nose like a trumpet. And he could n't keep his place in the Prayer-Book at all; and then the sermon! O Stan, dear, the sermon!" - And Constance fell into one of her prolonged paroxysms of laughter, which proved infectious to the extent of causing her companion also to gurgle contentedly.

Meanwhile the judge was defining his position to Amory with great distinctness. "Insist on the child's taking part in that mummery? No, sir! I should think not! I say nothing about Ruth; she's beyond me! There have been saints within the fold of the old Mother of Abominations herself, and the ways of the Spirit are past finding out by such old worldlings as you and me. But compel a healthy, wide-awake little person like Constance to listen to the twaddle of that young renegade"—

"Isn't that rather strong?"

"Maybe so. Let me say, then, that shallow, deplorable, dogmatical puppy! Attempting to foist his contemptible Puseyism on us! I'll own to a certain reluctant respect for the real thing; but this travesty — oh, no, no, not for a free American!"

"You're giving an odd illustration, Judge, of our supposed openness of mind."

"Mind? I tell you that mind has nothing to do with it! It's just a covert appeal to the senses, and I denounce it! Then the booby's sermon was all about what he had the cheek to call 'the sorrowful schism of these United States.' He pretended to think there was some doubt whether any of our clergy had a right to administer — upon my word, I'm not sure that he did n't say the Seven Sacraments! Little Con is right this time, and I shall uphold her!"

Amory attempted no further remonstrance, but

the reverie into which he sank seemed a rather troubled one.

In these days he and Stanton accompanied the sisters regularly upon their afternoon rides, and the "square party" seemed to resolve itself quite naturally, upon such occasions, into two pairs. Once, when, after indulging in a rather furious gallop, the younger two had fallen behind to breathe their horses, Stanton, having first indicated by a forward nod the direction of his remarks, inquired of his companion, "Don't you think she seems pretty cheerful nowadays?"

Constance assented, and there was a short pause, at the end of which the youth continued, a little diffidently, "Don't you believe Miss Ingestre was on a wrong tack when she told Mrs. Rothery—you know the time I mean—that Ruth was hope-

lessly in love with somebody?"

Constance examined the boy's face narrowly, to try and judge how far his intuitions had penetrated, then she said, with a slight emphasis on the adverb, "No, I don't believe that she's hopelessly in love with anybody."

"Do you think it's all settled?"

"Perhaps not quite, but very nearly."

"Well, I must say I'm disappointed in Ruth. I should have said that she was the last girl in the world to do what she didn't believe in, and of course she doesn't think it right for clergymen to marry. And when you call 'em 'priests' — Hang it! it does not sound the thing," he added, impartially.

Constance heard him quite through in silence, then she drew a deep sigh of relief. "I'm glad to find that I was n't so very stupid after all. It always aggravates me beyond anything, as you know, to find that Mrs. Rothery has been cleverer than I, and about this she was, —a little. But since you, with much better opportunities of judging, made exactly the same mistake, I don't so much mind."

"Would you object to being a trifle clearer? Where's my mistake?"

"It is this," and Constance laid her hand impressively on the other's arm, "Mr. Morecumbe is not the man."

Stanton St. John, Jr., emitted a long whistle of astonishment.

"It was natural, was n't it? to think that it must be he? Everything fitted in so perfectly, Miss Ingestre's knowing all about it, and above all, it's being hopeless. That made me absolutely certain. I knew Ruth would never marry a priest; and I must say I thought it was very odd that she should have cared for him in that way"—

"He's not altogether a bad sort of a fellow, Connie."

"Oh, I know that, but just remember his coat and hat, will you! However, I never doubted for a moment that it was he till a few days ago, when all of a sudden I realized who it was"—

"There's nobody else—except— By George!
Do you mean that it's the major?"

Constance nodded. "And ever since it came to me, my only wonder has been that I had n't seen it from the first. She's always adored him."

"What I don't see," objected Stanton, pres-

ently, "is where the hopelessness comes in."

"That," returned Constance, triumphantly, "is where Mrs. Rothery made her mistake, and I don't think she suspects even yet."

"Then, I tell you what, you'd better stand from under when she does, that's all!"

"I suppose she 'll be cross."

- "Cross! Why, she's made it the object of her life, they say, for the last twenty years, to keep him from marrying."
 - "Not really?"
- "Oh, yes she has, then. A girl jilted him"—Stanton stopped abruptly, only remembering, as he said the words, who Amory Wallis's faithless love had been. When he continued, it was with much less spirit. "They say it's because the money's his, and Mrs. Rothery has been afraid that if he married she'd be turned adrift."

"And now she will not be," said Constance in tones of keen regret, "Ruth is such a saint."

"You'd have sent her spinning if it had been you, I'll be bound," said Stanton; whereat the girl pouted, then laughed, and urged her horse forward in pursuit of the other pair, who had long been out of sight.

The very next day, Stanton took occasion to express to Constance his belief in the truth of

these suspicions. "It's a fact, Con. It's all there, and the only reason the dragon has n't found it out is that they freeze up solid when she's round."

"So does everybody."

"More or less, that's a fact. But it can't last much longer. She's bound to guess, or they to tell her. I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry to be going to Cambridge to-morrow."

"Well, really?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. 'Don't wilfully misunderstand, Constance.'" (The words were Mrs. Rothery's.) "But she will make herself confoundedly disagreeable, you know, when the time comes."

"I'm not sure," observed the more astute Constance. "It strikes me that, on the whole, she's been easier to get on with ever since our engagement. Not that she's intended it"—

"I should say not! She looks as black as thunder!"

"I know it, but she says very little, and who cares for looks? Perhaps, after this comes out, she'll be too furious to open her lips at all."

"Sit and wink, like that old fellow in Monte Christo. May I live to see the day! I suppose Ruth has n't said anything to you about it, has she?"

"Oh, no, indeed!"

Stanton wagged his head musingly. "It's curious you two girls should be so different, when

you've always been together and done the same things."

"It's just possible, don't you think," queried Constance sarcastically, "that we may have been different to begin with. There is such a thing as nature."

"I should think nature would make you get on better than you do," he continued unmoved. "I don't mean any blame, you know, but it's a fact that neither of you ever seems to know what the other is driving at."

"It's quite true," asserted the girl, soberly for her. "I don't understand Ruth, and I can't make her understand me, and so there we are. Only Ruth has ever so many others to talk to, and I've nobody but you, and you are going to-morrow."

CHAPTER XX.

There had been a faint suspicion of a something like serious and tender feeling in the last recorded words of Constance to her lover, but her momentary softness passed away, as a half-formed cloud will dissolve in a season of obstinate drouth. The betrothed had nothing but chaff for one another when the day of Stanton's departure finally arrived, and they giggled like two underbred school-children at the ostentatious delicacy of their elders in endeavoring to leave them alone on the last evening.

As for the shrewd surmises concerning Amory and Ruth, which they had confided to one another before parting, these had constituted a more striking illustration than it would have pleased either of them to know, of the somewhat stern proverb that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

Not yet, though ever more and more exhilarated by the celestial freshness of the Vita Nuova which seemed so marvellously to have dawned for him, though enamored, as he half fancied he had never been before, of the sweet and stately young figure beside which he found himself walking in the rose light of that autumnal sunrise, — not quite yet could Amory Wallis contrive to overcome a deep-

seated sense of resistance to the working of this new spell, or wholly to prevent the obscure word of warning which his dæmon seemed striving to utter.

"I love her," he boldly admitted to himself before the end of the first month, "I love her — this creature whom I have sworn to guard — I love her not as a legacy any longer" (he shivered involuntarily), "but for her own pure individual self. Does any saint in heaven know any reason why I should not? How else could I so perfectly discharge my trust as by assuming the office of her protector for life, if only she herself will have it so? The other is already cared for, and when her sister is married, how sadly she will stand alone!"

In spite of himself, he seemed at such times to be addressing an invisible court, and pleading a desperate cause. If ever he tried to think of himself as suing in propriâ formâ for the hand of his elder ward, imagination still refused to picture the scene. He knew, from the chance remarks they all occasionally let fall, that Ruth was wonderfully animated and embellished since he had come; that she was brighter, happier, more charming—fuller of life herself, and immeasurably more interested in the life of those about her—than she had ever been before, and there he bade himself rest. He resolutely subdued the impulses whose occasional ardor amazed himself, and resolved to wait; to respect, for a time, her so

nearly achieved detachment from all mundane things; to allow her to become used insensibly to her new self and to him; and for his own part to be content, as he thought he well might, with the inexpressible sweetness of the passing hour.

And Ruth, too, seemed to ask no more for a time than that her trance of undreamed of happiness might remain unbroken. She yielded a good many little points, in these days, on which she had hitherto been gently inflexible. She almost always wore in the evening the flowers - white and tea roses chiefly — which the singularly deft fingers of Constance arranged for her and insinuatingly presented, although she could never again be induced to put on the gay embroidered gown and oriental scarf. It rather distressed her to remember, when tenderly withstanding Constance upon this point, what Estelle had said to her only a very few days after Major Wallis's return, in one of that fair lady's water-spouts of reckless confidence.

"He declares that you have your own style, Ruth dear; that you are, in what he is pleased to call the strict sense of the term, unique; that the woman is like an aloe-flower who is called by the Graces to absolute simplicity of costume; and a great deal more nonsense of the same kind. All I can say is," the speaker went on with a pettish little laugh, while the blue eyes twinkled expressively, and the dimpled hands were outspread as widely as circumstances would permit,—"all I

can say is, that he was n't always like this. He used to admire costly things and rich ornaments as much as anybody. But oh the men, the men! They are all weather-cocks alike!"

"Oh, Miss Ingestre, please!" Ruth was blushing like a damask rose.

"Excuse me, my dear, excuse me! I am always forgetting that we have not known him for the same length of time."

As October approached, and with it the time fixed for Judge Ford's return to New York, certain practical questions came up for general discussion, and Mrs. Rothery herself had to relax her rule of reticence a little, and come down occasionally from her pedestal of merely critical observation. Ruth was almost twenty years old, and had never been formally introduced to the world. The troubled and uncertain times, and the fresh mourning of more than half the families composing the immediate circle of our friends, had cooperated with the girl's own ascetic fancies to make her seclusion easy. But now her younger sister was engaged to be married, and in the North at least, which was never invaded, the reaction toward gayety and extravagance, from the tense anxieties of the war period, was immediate and strong. As brilliant a social season as Boston can compass was in prospect, and the guardians of the sisters, both real and nominal, were unanimous in their opinion, that they should make their debut together. Constance, indeed, had long been anticipating with frank impatience the glories of her "coming out," and had found her sister so wistfully irresponsive upon this head that she had been fain to rehearse to good-natured Stanton himself the programme of her triumphs.

"All right," he said one day, after an unusually long and roseate recitation. "Have your fling! I want you to! Save me a dance or two in an evening and I'll ask no more, for you know how I hate floundering round to a fiddle; but mind you don't flirt beyond a certain point. Because if you do, you know I shall have to know the reason why."

Constance made him a grimace and executed a

pirouette.

Mrs. Rothery sat aloof, and figuratively speaking provisioned herself for a siege, whenever the subject of the sisters' introduction was broached by old Mr. St. John, to whom it seemed as needful a rite as their confirmation; or by Estelle, who was in a flutter of mysterious excitement about it; or by Amory. Jane knew that it must be, and that she would eventually have to play the part of chaperone; but her soul abhorred the thought of the late hours, and the bother of many toilettes, and the general unwholesomeness and disorganization; and she was resolved, for every reason, to make the acceptance of her own ungrateful part in the play a great and hardly won favor.

"I suppose you will take it upon yourself to overcome Ruth's religious scruples?" was her observation to Amory the first time he mentioned the matter to her in private.

"What particular scruples do you refer to?"

"Oh, don't fence with me, Amory! Life is not long enough. If you have not discovered it for yourself, Estelle has inevitably told you that it has been Ruth's day-dream for a good while now to become the bride of Heaven! She even dressed for the part—the little goose!—all last winter."

Amory's eyes flashed, but his tone, when he spoke, was neutral and even. "A perfectly natural impulse, I think, on the part of a high-minded, pious, and enthusiastic young creature, in a time of general danger and distress. It will be equally natural, I apprehend, that the impulse should pass with the occasion."

Jane smiled rather unpleasantly. "You are not too respectful of your ward's convictions."

"I am respectful," he said, a little hotly in spite of himself, "of her celestial purity and simplicity."

"And you propose to foster the growth of those delicate virtues by giving her a winter of round dances?"

"Come, come, Jane!" said her brother authoritatively, and regaining a wholly matter-of-fact tone; "you really carry your cantankerousness too far at times. All the world knows that a free-thinker's intolerance of religion is one of the most savage of human sentiments; but we're all bound — utilitarians as much as anybody — to subdue our evil tempers for the good of

society. Judge Ford and I both think, and Mr. St. John, who certainly has a right to a voice in the matter, agrees, that it is high time that the girls saw a little of the world, and you, of course, would be the natural person to take them out. But if you dislike the idea and positively decline the office, we must consider the next best arrangement, that is all."

"I have not said that I would not do it," Jane replied. "If it is the general wish, I suppose I shall. I have given the best years of my life already to trying to make sensible and useful women out of two flighty, fiery, and altogether unsatisfactory girls, who were nothing whatever to me. The time is very near, I trust, when I may openly, and without scandal to anybody, wash my hands of the whole worrying business. I consider that Constance's engagement released me practically from all responsibility about her, and Ruth has long made a virtue of obeying a higher law than mine."

"My dear sister," said Amory, very gravely, "you have done in the most thorough manner what you sincerely believed to be your duty by my wards, and my obligations to you, great already on my own behalf, must be greater yet on theirs. They are women now, as you say, and passing beyond all tutelage. Heaven grant that in our ignorance we may have made no fatal mistakes!"

"Oh, nonsense about fatality! Constance, who never yet selected a gown for herself, has chosen her own lot, as you see, and the world will consider it a brilliant and enviable one. I have no doubt that I get credit for having been exceedingly calculating and canny in securing an arrangement which I have thoroughly disapproved from the first. Ruth, on the other hand, will have money enough, I suppose, however things may turn, to endow a church or a convent, or a starveling husband, as the case may be. Estelle has of course hinted to you her suspicions about Mr. Morecumbe."

Amory smiled a little constrainedly. "Estelle hints a great many things, but times are changed indeed if her suggestions are to be taken seriously. I shall speak with Ruth myself about these matters, — perhaps to-day."

An indefinable something in his tone caused Jane to look up sharply; but now, as on many other occasions since his return, she found the face, which had once been so mobile, an impenetrable mask. He sat silent for some time, then rose and held out his hand to his sister, frankly, yet with a touch of something ceremonious in his manner. "I understand, Jane," he said, "that you have agreed once more to sacrifice your own private inclination for the benefit of the whole. I always thought you would. You are a good woman, you know, and will have your reward."

"Thank you! I have had no thought of reward from first to last."

"I believe you implicitly. Good morning, sister."

He had heard faintly while they were talking, for the wind was southerly, the tinkle of the little bell of St. Birinus from the wooded point. He asked himself what day it could be, and guessed, by the season of the year, that it was that of St. Michael and All Angels, — a feast which he remembered hearing Ruth say that she very specially loved. She would have been to church, of course, and would, perhaps, be walking home, at least from Miss Ingestre's gate, and he resolved that he would straightway go and meet her.

But Ruth, for whom the secret charm and potency of the services of that day lay in their association with the time when she had known her guardian first, and the time when he had left them to join the army, had been stricken with alarm by the tumult and distraction of her own mind, when she tried to make her wonted preparation on the vigil. Then for the first time she had fully realized, and made to herself the horrified admission. that the practices wherein she had so long found solace and strength were grown hollow for her and perfunctory. A veil seemed to fall from the true object of her worship; and she knew whose visible and mortal presence it was which had filled the last rich month so over full of joy, and where she stood, she who was under a vow!

Discipline had done much for Ruth, more, indeed, than even the most reverent of her elders yet knew; but nature had been too early and too forcibly repressed in the impassioned girl not to

cry aloud now with appalling vehemence: "It was no true vow! It was only made to myself! The Church would not hold it binding!"

She shut her books and extinguished her light, and lying stealthily down, remained for hours upon her little bed, with wide eyes uplifted and hands rigidly locked, while her maiden bosom was shaken from time to time by sighs so long and deep that Constance once turned over upon her own soft pillow and murmured sleepily: "Why do you breathe so, Ruthie? I thought it was a storm."

At last, toward morning, a thought came to innocent Ruth which she fondly deemed a blessed one, and after that she slept.

It was not true, as rumor had it, that Mr. Morecumbe already received the formal confessions of his flock. He did not consider that he was as yet qualified to do so. But he had thought it well, by way of preparing both himself and the souls of his cure for the technical relation of director and penitent, to encourage a confidential attitude on the part of his earliest and firmest supporters. Ruth knew that Miss Ingestre had often applied to him, when perplexed by the uncertain deliverances of her own intermittent conscience, and had professed herself wonderfully illuminated and assisted by his counsels. A mixture of maiden shyness and pious awe had hitherto held her back, but now she was overpowered by the imperious need of help, - tangible human help against herself, and the terrifying impulses of her own heart. She wished that her priest had been an older man, or Judge Ford, perhaps,—a more priestly one; but as it was, her need she felt to be instant, and her weakness great.

She knew that Mr. Morecumbe was in the habit on certain feast days of passing the interval between the two morning services in the vestry—called by some ardent spirits sacristy—attached to the little chapel, and that then and there he was understood to be at home to visitors in need of ghostly counsel. When, therefore, his benediction had been spoken, Ruth lingered with her sweet face buried in her hands until the house was emptied of its few worshipers, and the clergyman had disappeared, and then, arising, passed quickly down the aisle, knocked at the door of the little room, and obeyed the low invitation to enter.

The sudden spring from the young man's meditative attitude, and the startled look which came over his thin features, when he saw her, were enough to alarm Ruth instantly at what she had done. She fell back a step with a deep blush, while he, with a violent but flagrantly unsuccessful effort after paternal calm, stammered hastily, "You, Miss Curwen! You are come — what — Can I do anything for you?" He rose and placed a chair for her, but she did not take it.

His evident agitation helped Ruth to be collected. Her beauteous color faded slowly away.

"I think I have intruded when I ought not,"

she said. "Pray forgive me. I am in great need of counsel, and it seemed natural to come to you. I knew that Miss Ingestre and others had done it."

"Certainly. You are quite right!" But there was something strange in Mr. Morecumbe's tone, and he drew his own chair a little farther away. A curiously painful pause ensued, after which he added in the same unnatural voice, "Pray sit down, Miss Curwen, and tell me your trouble."

Ruth closed her pleading eyes for an instant, like one who suddenly finds herself on the brink of a precipice from which she cannot turn back. Then she said firmly, and without preamble, "Is a vow binding which one has made only to one's self?"

"I — I — do not understand. You must be more explicit"—he tried to say, "my child," but could not.

Ruth strove for stillness, as she would have done under the surgeon's knife. "When my guardian was missing," she went on, scarcely above a whisper, "in the dreadful war time, I made a promise upon my knees that, if he might only come back to life, I would leave the world, I would go into a sisterhood, where I could only pray for him. When I first knew that he was safe, I did not waver, and still I was unhappy, — very unhappy. But now he is come, and — Oh, tell me, Mr. Morecumbe, am I bound? It was only to myself I said it."

"Only to yourself," he repeated with a stern-

ness that seemed to freeze her. Then there was another dead pause, during which Ruth dared not lift her eyes. It seemed to her as if the sound of her own heart-beats must ring through all the bare little room, and vie with the loud ticking of the wooden clock on a bracket above Mr. Morecumbe's head. At last, but stiffly and dryly still, the young director spoke. "I cannot tell you. I am not competent to decide such a question. You must have higher authority than mine."

Ruth rose with quiet dignity. "I feared I

was wrong to come," she began.

"Oh, no, no, I assure you! It is I who — who lack experience. If — if I could have helped you" — But it was too late to reassure her now, even had his constrained utterance been calculated to do so.

"Thank you for the wish, Mr. Morecumbe. Good morning!" and with an even step, Ruth glided out of her confessional down the church aisle, and forth into the sunshine, tears welling into her eyes, and every nerve a-quiver.

CHAPTER XXI.

MEANWHILE Amory Wallis, who had been striding along the curving beach on which abutted the lawns of the residences which lined the bay, found his steps arrested, just short of the parti-colored pagoda which served Miss Ingestre for a bathing-house, by the passage of a procession of three. It was composed of two maid-servants laden with towels, followed by a rotund figure in a fleecy wrap, and surmounted by a huge white muslin hat. thickly wreathed with forget-me-nots, from under the shade of which there sprang a little shriek of recognition when Amory was discerned. Impatient of any detention, now that his purpose was fully formed, he was for lifting his own headgear merely, and hurrying on, but that was not to be.

"Stop a minute, Amory," panted the little lady, "and don't go flying from me like that! I never see you nowadays. Dear me," she added, as he paused with evident unwillingness, "how changed you are! Your manners have lost all that elegant repose which used to make you so distingué."

Amory pulled at his moustache. "I dare say! It is the force of circumstances. You, too, are changed in some respects, Miss — Estelle!"

"It is cruel in you to remind me of it!"

"How so? You began it. Why should there be any more cruelty on one side than on the other?"

"You are horribly brusque, but I forgive you! Sit down beside me for a moment;" and Estelle dropped upon a rustic bench and motioned her

attendants into the pagoda.

Amory struggled for an instant, internally of course, and then resigned himself. Estelle bared her hands, as ever lavishly bedecked, and regarded them pensively. "I wish you would tell me frankly, Amory," she murmured, "how it is that you find me changed."

"Why, for one thing, Estelle," he said, unable to repress a smile, "you are a great deal more pious than you used to be! I never dreamed of finding you this morning, for instance, because when I heard the little bell ringing I made sure

you would be at church."

Miss Ingestre dropped her eyes, and turned all her rings round one by one, until the jewel of each came accurately on the outside and in the middle of the finger. "I have tried to be good," she said with a sort of whimsical humility; "I do try quite assiduously. How could one do otherwise with such a beautiful young example before one?" Amory drew a little nearer to her at this, and the movement appeared to encourage Estelle to lay bare her soul. "I assure you that I try! But"—recklessly, and casting up at her old friend a look

both pitiful and comic — "I have found by experience that it won't do to carry it too far! If I overstep a certain line, the whole thing turns hollow to me, disenchanted as I am. You know I lived a Unitarian for years under Horatio Forney, and I find myself positively forced to cut off some of the saints! I'm an Ethiopian and a leopard," was the culmination of her confidence, "and that's the truth, Amory."

"You don't look much of either the one or the other," he said; and Estelle dimpled and bridled and then suddenly became solemn again. "I mean, of course," she added, "by comparison with those two early called and unreservedly devoted young creatures," and she nodded in the direction of the chapel.

"Those two?"

"Our precious Ruth and our holy young rector,—if indeed he consents to remain a secular clergyman."

There was a short silence, and then Amory spoke in the tone of dry command, which in these days he seemed often to employ unconsciously. "Will you have the goodness to tell me, Estelle, plainly, for the sake of our friendship, just what you mean,—what reason you have to associate their names like that?"

"What reason?" repeated the blonde, a little scared, but somewhat indignant, too, at his manner, and standing her ground. "Well, the knowledge of their perfect sympathy in all essential things,

and that they are both young and handsome, and thrown constantly together, and absorbed in the same work. Dear me, Amory! look back a little, will you? What could be more natural?"

"You do not, then, know of any definite understanding between them? You do not believe that

the parson has yet spoken?"

"If he has n't," said the lady, somewhat obstinately, "it is only because they both still fancy, poor young dears! that they are pledged to celi-

bacy."

Amory looked capable of consigning their pledges to perdition, but he did not so unmannerly express himself. "Then, my good friend," he said, rising and extending his hand with precisely the conclusive gesture he had used to Jane an hour before, "I must ask you to excuse me. I see a figure coming down the steps yonder, which I think I know for hers, and I shall go and meet her, as I came out to do, and ask her to be my own wife."

Estelle, too, sprang to her feet, the hue of her cheeks altered to the purplish tints of a fading rose, her eyes dilated; and she cried out at last, without a trace of affectation, "Good heavens! What an unnatural thing!"

"Unnatural!" And even Amory's bronze tint deepened as he repeated the word almost menacingly.

"If you don't feel it yourself," Estelle gasped, with her hand upon her heart, "I suppose I have

no business to say so, and I ask your pardon. But, oh! affections may be transferred, — I know it very well, — but transferred from a mother to a daughter — Ah!" She drew a deep breath at last, and then added gravely, "But it will not be! My poor friend, she will never marry you!"

"We shall see!"

"Never! She loved you once, — very warmly for a child. I divined her innocent heart, — I do not need to work these things out like an algebraic problem, as Jane Rothery does, — but she thought the sentiment wrong, and she conquered it. Another, and I suppose a higher one, has long since taken its place. I beseech you to take example by her, and not disturb her calm. See how you have shocked even me!"

"I am sorry, and I thank you for your interest in us both."

"But you will still go to meet her?" Estelle dropped her voice a little, for Ruth had now drawn so near them, in her swift walk along the shore, that her features could be plainly discerned.

"Certainly."

"Then good-bye," said the blonde, tragically, and indicating by an impatient gesture to the curious attendants who still hovered about the door of the pagoda that they were to return to the house. "Good-bye, Amory! And may you never repent what you are about to do!"

He bowed in silence as she retreated, and then moved rapidly away toward the white figure glid-

ing nearer along the shining sand. The moment he came up with Ruth, he perceived her strange agitation.

"My dearest girl," he cried, anxiously, "what

is it? Has anything frightened you?"

He drew her hand within his arm, and led her with unspeakable tenderness to the seat from which he and Miss Ingestre had so lately risen. He could see that the girl made a desperate effort after composure, but in vain. Her lip curled grievously, and she gave a convulsive sob.

"My darling!" He tried to get possession of her other hand, but instead she drew away the one he already held, and clasped the two together a little wildly. Her eyes were turned upward with

a glance of desperate appeal.

"Ruth, Ruth!" he cried, "do not look like that! Turn to me! Tell me what has distressed you so. To whom on earth can you go in trouble, if not to me?"

"To no one," she answered, mournfully, "on earth." But she obeyed his voice, and turned her

eyes on his.

"No, dear love," he said, quickly, yet with solemnity, "for you are mine! She gave you to me, to guard and cherish, —a child then, but a woman now, — a true, sweet woman, whom I most truly love. I cannot be your guardian much longer, unless — Ruth, dear, you must be my wife, and give me a husband's right to shield and protect you all our lives."

She shook her head slowly, still holding her dark eyes fixed on his, with the same appealing look. Ruth had grown very pale, and one or two large, bright tears rolled slowly down her delicate cheeks.

"Oh, my child, I think you love me! And

you can make me happy by a word."

"Love you!" she said softly, and with adorable frankness. "Oh, yes, indeed I love you — all these years — more than all the world — even my Connie! But, Guardian, you do not know. It is because I have loved you so dearly that I must not — God will not have it so: I promised when I lost you — you know the terrible time — that if He would only save you alive, I would become a sister of the poor, or something like that, and not ask for any other delight. And now — oh, it is hard! I did not think it would have been like this; but I must, I will keep my word to Him! Help me to do it, Guardian! You know one's word is sacred; you would never break your own."

"A word," Amory answered, quicker than thought, and barely conscious of his own casuistry, "a word — a pledge — inviolable indeed between human beings, because such things are needed to bind to one another poor, fallible, faithless, purblind men. But what is a word to God? He goes behind the word. He looks only at the heart — to see if it is docile to his will. How was it with Abraham and Isaac on the mountain? As

soon as He knew the father's heart submissive, He saved the child alive."

A great sunbeam of joy flashed out of Ruth's wet eyes. "Oh, is it so? Might I believe that?"

"You might, you must, believe that God is kinder to us than we can be to ourselves, or even to one another. Resign the joy that He recalls—oh, yes! But do not slight his goodness by rejecting what He freely offers!"

Ruth's eyes fell, and she leaned slightly toward him. Then the clasped hands which had been half unlocked closed again tightly, and she drew back and breathed in a scarcely audible whisper, the word "Mamma!"

"She gave you to me," he repeated firmly, and folded her closely in his arms.

She would, perhaps, have had strength to resist her happiness longer, but for the unaccountable failure that very morning of the prop on which she had chiefly relied for defence against it. Yet how could she have long withstood the sweep of her whole nature cooperating with the stress of his authority? They sat for a long time side by side in a silence neither cared to break, while the dewy autumn morning imperceptibly ripened into a glowing noon. He caressed, but would not scrutinize too closely this boon of a new life accorded him so late; while for her it was enough to lean lightly against his arm, feeling in every nerve such exquisite lassitude as may follow the relaxation of an immemorial strain. Only once she said, a little anxiously, "Guardian?"

"Yes, love; but you must learn to call me Amory. Guardian belongs to the old time."

"Oh, let me keep — for a little while — the dear old name! Only tell me why — if it is really right — why I am still, in my heart of hearts, a little, a very little afraid?"

"Is it not Hawthorne," he replied, "who says somewhere, very beautifully, that happiness being of the very substance of eternity, spirits who are still embodied may well tremble in it?"

The notion struck her mystical fancy, as he had known it would, and seemed for the time being wonderfully to deepen her content.

Estelle was at the window of her boudoir. pretty well withdrawn behind the rich lace curtains, but watching breathlessly through an operaglass the two heads just visible across the grassy undulations of her lawn. She saw them gradually but surely approach, and when there was no perceptible space between them, she closed her glass and turned away. Rising softly, she crossed the chamber, carefully bolted the door to secure herself from the possible intrusion of Fifine, then extended her figure upon the blue damask couch, applied her handkerchief to her eyes, and burst into tears. She cried for a considerable time abundantly, and so to speak, systematically, as one who pays with interest long arrears of complex emotion. Just why she wept so profusely, she would herself have found it difficult to say. Some of her tears were for her own lost youth doubtless, and for a certain vague and volatile sentiment once upon a time associated by her with Amory's name and his earlier semblance. Others had a deeper source in a feeling not very far removed from disappointment both in Ruth and Mr. Morecumbe, and a keen presentiment that the elaborate religious practices, which she had so thoroughly enjoyed sharing with the enthusiastic girl, might prove erelong to have had something dreadfully factitious about them, and suddenly cease to gratify her taste no less than her soul. But Estelle was, after all, as people go, unselfish; and when she had regarded this aspect of the affair for a few minutes, she began, still weeping, to consider the other. Ruth would be saved to the world, and those who loved her in it; and Amory -well, poor Amory! it was hard if, after suffering for so many years from the wound in his affections, — and all he had endured besides in that wicked war! - he might not have a little comfort before he died; and if he could find it so - And the men were all alike, and Jane Rothery would be so furious!

It was at this point that Estelle dried her eyes, and her dimples began to reappear. Her own resolution was taken. She would cast away all personal considerations and range herself heartily on the side of these incongruous lovers, and make to herself a new interest in life out of taking their part. After all, it was a romantic story; and romance in any form was grateful to Estelle.

Meanwhile Amory and his bride to be were drawing near his own door. "We will tell them all how it is at once, will we not?" he said as they paused on the veranda. "We will go together to my sister first, and then you may seek out Connie, and I will find the judge. Better get all that over without delay, don't you think so?" And Ruth laughed softly and blushed, and said of course he was right.

But he could feel that she panted like a bird when, drawing her hand once more within his arm, he led her to Jane's writing table, and touched that busy personage lightly on the shoulder. "Sister," he said simply, the moment she looked up, "Ruth is going to be my wife. Will you not wish us joy?"

Mrs. Rothery had good blood in her veins, and the experience of fifty-five years. A slight shock sometimes made her sputter: a great one produced no visible effect whatever. She regarded the pair steadily for a half dozen seconds, and then, "You have pleased yourselves doubtless. I wish you"—emphatically—"all possible happiness." And this was all she said. Moved by irresistible feeling, Ruth stepped timidly forward and kissed—a passive cheek.

"You know her way, dearest," whispered Amory to Ruth in the hall, at the foot of the staircase where she had once nearly fainted in his arms, "and you know, too, how stanch and strong she is."

[&]quot; Oh, yes."

- "Better luck with Connie," he lingered to add, and his words proved prophetic, for Constance anticipated her sister's confession before she was well inside their chamber door.
- "I know, I know!" she cried, clapping her hands; "I know perfectly well what you have come to say. It is in your eyes, Ruth dear. You and Guardian are engaged! Stanton and I knew that it would be so. We saw exactly how it was before he went away."

"Really — really?"

- "Of course. We 've had experience, you know," said Constance quaintly.
- "And you are glad, my Connie?" The sisters were in each other's arms.
- "Perfectly delighted! Why, Ruthie, what are you crying about? Are you not as happy as a queen?"

"Oh, yes! Too happy!"

- "Nonsense about too happy! You are too pretty to live: that's what it is. And now you will be just like other girls and go to parties, and have lovely gowns, and by and by a charming house of your own! Only—have you thought?—where will she be? And what will she say?"
 - "She knows already. She did not say much."
- "Oh, I can guess! That's exactly the way I said she would take it! It is simply too delicious! I shall write to Stan this very moment, may n't I, and tell him how clever we were?"

What the elder guardian said to the younger

was: "Is it so indeed? Well, well! I own I have thought from time to time, and upon the whole hoped, that it would end so. She's a kind of angel, but you will know how to care for her. Well, well! I wish you great happiness! My occupation will soon be gone, that's evident."

"You will be our occupation in future," said Amory, and the two men shook hands with the utmost cordiality.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was strange how easily the little world of the three villas adapted itself to the new and wholly unexpected order of things. To Ruth and Amory, the sunny autumn days passed peacefully in reading, walking, riding together. Congratulatory fêtes, on a simple scale, were given both by Miss Ingestre and Stanton St. John, Sen., after which the big house was first closed and its owner went back with Judge Ford to New York, and then Estelle also abandoned the shore until another season should have come round. She was by this time reveling so magnanimously in the interest of the present situation as keenly to regret that the time had again arrived for that triennial visit to the Western wilds from which, on its last occasion, she had so abruptly returned under the escort of her old friend, Dr. Forney. The lease of the house which the heiress had so long occupied in Boston expired that autumn; but she engaged for the two months preceding Lent a sumptuous apartment in the favorite hotel of the period, and would by no means have missed returning to what she called the "civilized states" in time for the coming-out ball. St. Birinus was closed until another summer, and Mr. Morecumbe disappeared abruptly from the eyes of men — and women. He had begun his novitiate.

The introduction of the sisters came off on the tenth of December with a fair amount of éclat. There was a good deal of curiosity about them: their story was a singular one; they had been educated very exclusively; they were rumored handsome, and understood to be very rich. This was one side of their case as heard and adjudicated by the social arbiters of the old Puritan city. On the other hand, they were aliens after all, - which goes for much in cautious and complacent Boston, — and they were both already affianced. Mrs. Rothery knew her monde very well, better, apparently, than her monde knew her, having always, in fact, been more feared than loved therein: and her presentiment proved quite correct, that she herself would be everywhere credited with having negotiated both the marriages, which, for widely differing reasons, she so heartily disapproved. But on this, as on all other points in these days, Jane was impenetrably stoical.

Some loquacious people even went so far as to say that the quite opposite lines taken by the two sisters in the world, must also have been carefully devised beforehand, with a view to greater effect. Ruth did not dance, and the charitably disposed said it was very pretty of her, engaged as she was to a man so much older than herself, — "that antediluvian Major Wallis," the débutantes called him. "And you know she was always terribly

religious!" Others protested that it was presuming upon her beauty, a mere affectation of singularity, — that, and those extremely simple, high, white silks she always wore. Constance, on the other hand, danced like a fairy, and was immensely popular as a partner. She had soon, moreover, a host of girl acquaintances; but with these, although rather the fashion, she was not exactly a favorite: she loved to provoke their jealousy; she had not been at their school; she was, in short, not like them.

Constance summed up the results of her first weeks in society, with her usual frankness and vivacity, on an "off night" to Stanton, he having to leave the next day and pass the holidays with his grandfather, who was ailing a little, in New York: "Oh, yes, it has been very nice,—awfully nice, of course. It's too bad you will not be here for the New Year's ball. I have such a lovely new pink gown" (white was not yet de rigueur for young girls in their first season). "But you will see that I have some souvenir roses to carry,"—Stanton nodded,—"a good big bunch, grand comme ça," and Constance indicated a considerable circumference; "I want it bigger than Edith Dibdin's last. Do you remember?"

The well-trained lover nodded again. Constance had given him permission to smoke a cigarette in her presence, and his lips were occupied with that.

[&]quot;I think, upon the whole," pursued the young

lady, "that it has been much nicer for me, being all the time engaged to you. I have had more attention. Men feel freer to dance with me a good many times in an evening, you know. And then, Ruthie not dancing at all, I get all the attention they think they owe the family. I don't seem to see anything at all of Ruthie. We really go to quite a different set of houses. Lots of old swells ask her to dinner, for the major's sake, who never recognize my existence."

"' The angels wanted her up in heaven, But they never asked for me!"

murmured Stanton jeeringly, out of a vulgar parody of Poe's famous love-song.

"Bah!" said Constance, profanely. "What do I want of their stiff old dinner parties and their intellectual talk? They would bore me to death. Dancing is the only real fun, and that is divine."

Constance had told as much of the truth as ought — perhaps — to be expected of any girl. There are vague yearnings, obscure impulses, deep down in the consciousness of every rapidly growing creature, many of which will perish inevitably, in the hour of their birth, if they are never embodied in definite words. A few only are fated to persist and grow in secret, as they might never have done in the open light of day. So long as her feet were in motion, Constance was happy; but there were intervening hours of lassitude, during which her fancy roamed afield in search of

some more ideal object, some richer joy, than any she had yet known. These were the times when she envied Ruth what seemed her deep and even bliss,—her perfect rest upon a spirit stronger than her own; and the very fact that she did so became an added bar to confidence between the sisters. It was Amory himself who suddenly, unwittingly,—one might say accidentally, if there were any such thing as accident,—supplied an image of sufficiently romantic aspect, an object around which the fleeting dreams of little Constance could begin to crystallize. To build and to decorate a shrine for Stanton St. John, Jr., would have been droll indeed, but here was an invisible demi-god who combined every element of the adorable.

A letter came for Major Wallis, one stormy day in midwinter, which betrayed that reluctant narrator into an unusually long train of army reminiscences.

"Is it possible," said he, "that I never mentioned in my home letters the name of Alexis Ardashteff?"

Ruth alone recollected his having done so. "He was the Russian who succeeded you on General Bell's staff, was he not?" she said.

"Precisely. I thought I must at least have mentioned his name, for those were the days when I still perpetrated epistles. He was in Macon prison with me, too, and his story is almost worth the telling."

The sisters begged for it in unison, and Amory,

quite willing to digress from the uncongenial subject of his own experiences, went on to give a graphic and interesting account of a member of that small class which formed one of the most singular elements in the armies of the Rebellion, those foreigners of every social grade who were impelled by so many diverse motives to join their fortunes, lend their prowess, and, if need be, give their lives, to one or the other of the conflicting parties.

No officer could have served as long as Major Wallis had done without coming in contact with at least one of these men, and Alexis Ardashteff was by no means an unfavorable specimen. His birth was noble; his appearance distinguished; his mental accomplishments marvelous; his personal bravery great. It seemed to have been the pure fascination of fighting which had drawn him over the sea.

Alexis had been an only child, and his earliest recollections were of danger and mystery. They had to do with the fact that his father was deeply engaged in the conspiracy of 183 –. Just when all was ripe for action and success was deemed secure, the secret had been disclosed, the swift vengeance had fallen. Accepting his own fate without emotion, General Ardashteff had contrived the escape of the two who might so well have been involved in it, — his wife and child. Madame Ardashteff was of that temper that she would joyfully have followed her husband to Siberia, but of

this there was no question. Within a week from the day on which the plot was discovered, he had ceased to live, and she was on the way to France with her four-year-old boy.

The mother of Alexis loved him passionately, and yet she hated him, too, for the true Muscovite contempt of death was hers, and but for him she would never have survived her husband and her happiness.

Something had been saved from the wreck of their fortunes, and twenty long years were doomed to pass away before she drew her last weariful breath at Bordighera; but joy and sorrow, hope and fear, were but names to her henceforth.

Fitfully, indifferently, until he was past the years of tutelage, the mother strove to animate the son with his father's aims, and make him what his father might have been: but her abiding fatalism influenced him more than her occasional exhortations; his brilliant parts were seldom seriously engaged; and in short he took life, in Paris and upon the Riviera, as it came to him. After her death, he had roamed far and wide, and, altogether blasé with Europe, was planning a trip to America when the civil war broke out. He had been, for some years of his boyhood, at a military school; the business of war had always possessed more attractions for him than any other; and offering his services to General Bell, he had immediately received a staff appointment. Amory had known him slightly at this time, but how great a resource the two men became to one another, when they were afterwards fellow-prisoners, need hardly be said.

Both had been great readers, especially of the pessimistic philosophers and poets, whom they discussed interminably. More and more, however, as they did so, Amory realized that his own attachment to the *culte* of these men had been but a phase of development which he had now thoroughly outgrown; and at first he fancied that his new-found friend was but passing through the stage from which he, Amory, had emancipated himself. Alexis knew better. His "want of faith in all" was congenital and ineradicable, a part of his inheritance as a subject of the Tzar.

To the girls, of course, Amory touched but lightly on the speculative side of his intercourse with Alexis, but he gave some rather thrilling instances of his personal intrepidity, and ended by saying, "I have been thinking for some time that he might turn up any day. He was hunting in the Rocky Mountains all the autumn, but it is almost time now for that amusement to have palled upon him. The most erratic fellow! But I'll try to induce him to stay with us a little if he comes. He will interest you all."

A spark had been set to the inflammable material of Constance's romantic imagination. Russia was even more of a terra incognita then than now, and the invention of the Russian romance was not yet. To see a Russian in the flesh would be

much, but to know and speak face to face with one who had been the hero of such a story, what a novel experience! What éclat it would confer! Alexis Ardashteff was immediately installed as the hero of a long series of dazzling daydreams, and many a time when Constance, having fallen into a passive attitude, sat for the space of five minutes with shining eyes fixed upon nothing in particular, and sweet Ruth, reasoning from experience, fancied that she must be dreaming of Stanton, it was the noble Russian volunteer, larger than life, and handsomer than all humanity, who ruled the passing vision. Her excitement may be imagined when, upon the fourteenth of February (Constance had reason to remember that St. Valentine's day), Amory received a note from Ardashteff announcing his arrival at Parker's Hotel. "I'll make him send his traps over here directly," Major Wallis said. "We can give him a room, can't we. Jane?" And Mrs. Rothery assented, as she now assented to everything.

Ardashteff preferred keeping his lodgment at the hotel, but he willingly accepted, for a few days, Amory's invitation to the Butternut Street house, and he made a most favorable impression on all its denizens but one. The first feeling of Constance, when at last she beheld her hero, was one of intense disappointment. He did not look in the least degree either mysterious or foreign. It might have been a thorough-bred American who stood before her, with a tall and slight though perfectly

well-knit figure, and a girlishly fair complexion, set off by the dark brown of his hair and moustache, by finely drawn eyebrows, and long, slightly curling lashes, which disguised and left for a considerable time in doubt the real color of his eyes. In no way, save perhaps in the pitiable one of an added finish and perfection of toilette, did he seem to Constance to be distinguished from the men whom she met every evening, nor would any one at first sight have given him more than the average years of the dancing man, although he was really thirty-two. He did not even talk like a foreigner, but conversed fluently in English which was only a trifle too choice, and with the slightest possible accent. Her revulsion of feeling made Constance quite pettish, and she deigned hardly a glance in the direction of the stranger when she rose with Ruth to leave the drawing-room and make ready for the evening's festivity. By the time her precious pink silk was duly fastened (the sisters were allowed a maid at last), and Stanton's gorgeous nosegay disengaged from its wrappings and triumphantly clasped, Constance had come to the sapient and altogether characteristic determination to punish Captain Ardashteff well for having failed to come up to her preconceived idea. She barely recognized his existence during that evening's german, and was so uncommonly distant and disdainful in her manner for some days, that the fact attracted attention.

The Russian's arrival had naturally created a

stir among the volatile maidens of Constance's more intimate circle, and she was besieged on afternoon calls and in dressing-rooms for particulars concerning this bright new Northern star, which she sulkily declined to give. "She did not see," she averred, "what the fuss was about. She found him horribly uninteresting."

Exasperated by her manner, a belle of five seasons at last remarked rather tartly, "You may just as well own up, Constance dear. The man is such an idiot that he does n't admire you."

"I don't wish him to. I don't care whether he does or not. That is not the question. I said that I found him a bore."

Her antagonist tittered. "We all know what that means, little girl! But I really don't see why you should care. You have partners enough in all conscience."

Constance made no reply, but if Alexis Ardashteff had been Caliban himself, she would yet have done her best from that moment to monopolize his attentions.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Magnanimous Alexis good-naturedly allowed himself to be monopolized, and was rather flattered, upon the whole, by the simple wiles which amused him better than more artificial coquetries could have done. With such he had been surfeited years before, but this gay, confiding, yet amazingly self-confident young creature, so audacious and yet so transparently innocent, afforded him a new sensation. He read her character, or so he fancied, at a glance, but he felt some slight curiosity concerning the cause of her sudden change of attitude, and when their reconciliation seemed thoroughly established, he took an early opportunity of attacking the young lady herself upon the subject.

"Now, Miss Constance," he said, finding her alone in the drawing-room one day before dinner, "now that you have quite forgiven me for I know not what, you are going to tell me how I sinned,

and permit me to make atonement."

"I don't know what you mean," she declared, beginning boldly enough, but blushing and lowering her eyes before she had finished the phrase.

"Ah, but I think you do, all the same, pardon me. It was at the very first moment of my arrival." He paused, but Constance remained resolutely mute. "When you might have been generous," he proceeded, "and remembered that I, arriving unexpectedly, a foreigner, strange to you and to your language, would naturally be gauche."

The faint tinge of mockery in his tone did not escape the girl, and provoked her to speech. "You do not in your heart think that you were in the least awkward."

He laughed lightly. "I had hoped — until you undeceived me — that my efforts to acquire the American manner had been successful."

"I should think you would prefer having the manners of your own country."

"It is a trait of us Russians to wish to be at home wherever we find ourselves, to be conspicuous by no startling peculiarities."

There was enough of softening in the girl's expression to show the man of the world that he was on the right track.

"I am thoroughly a Russian, I assure you," he continued, "though I can barely remember my country. I was a mere infant when I left it, indeed; and yet often and often I have the true—how do you call it?—mal du pays."

"Homesickness?"

"That is it! It overwhelms me like a wave sometimes, the longing for the steppes, and then I feel that I must go back."

Constance's face was all aglow with eager interest. "And why have you not gone?" she questioned.

"That is a long, sad story, Miss Constance, but I will tell you some time, — if you care to hear," he added in a low voice as Mrs. Rothery entered the room.

That astute lady noticed the girl's beaming eyes, and the sudden straightening of the Russian's figure, with a vague forecast of new complications for which nobody would ever be able to blame her.

Silly Constance fancied that she had baffled their guest completely on the subject of her own sentiments towards himself. In reality her naïve self-betrayal had added a piquancy to the prim Boston life which otherwise he would soon have found insupportable. It had always been his habit in society to select some one lady on whom to bestow for the moment or the season, as the case might be, a devotion as exclusive in appearance as it was hollow in reality. His had been an unfortunate school of feminine character, but such as it was, he had learned its lessons thoroughly, and he was speedily enthroned on a grander pedestal than ever in the imagination of Constance.

"Bah!" said Ardashteff to himself; "the baby knows not what she wants, but she shall have all she fancies." And forthwith he began to seize and even to make opportunities for tête-à-tête conversation, and the more he told her of Russia, and Russian life and thought, the more eager she became for further details, following and comprehending those he gave with what seemed even to him, familiar as he was with the arrowy intelligence of

his own countrywomen, astonishing acumen. He was led on by degrees to be more unreserved with this palpitating child, whose parted lips and changing color proved an extraordinary stimulus to eloquence, than he had been for years with any mortal of either sex; and the cynical philosophy of life, which he half-unconsciously unfolded, began to exercise over her hitherto intractable spirit its own baneful fascination.

She had been toying with "free thought" the previous year, and had more than once, as we have seen, moved her careless elders to merriment by boasting of her intent entirely to free herself from the trammels of ancient superstition; but the uttermost transports of revolt conceivable by her mutinous little spirit hardly brought her to the beginning, hardly instructed her in the alphabet of his profound and passionless negations.

Attention was in a measure diverted from the rapidly growing intimacy of these two by the serious illness of Miss Ingestre. The winter had been one long vexation to the devoted little lady. Detained by unexpected complications in her affairs, first in Minnesota and then in New York, she had not only missed the introduction of her favorites, and been forced to surrender at a sacrifice the apartment where she had meant to install herself, but, arriving in Boston at last with a violent cold upon her, she had gone the same evening, in technical full dress, to the Shrove Tuesday ball, a military one, as it happened, given in a vast pub-

lic hall, where Amory, for the sake of Constance, had consented to be one of the managers.

A message came early the next morning from Miss Ingestre's hotel which brought Jane to her bedside before the other members of the Butternut Street household had made their appearance below stairs. Poor Estelle was already in a high fever, her staccato notes quite extinct, and it cost her an evident effort even to press her friend's hand, and say plaintively, in an interrupted whisper, "Thanks—so kind—I have quite given up, you see! To sit still—in a draught—and see others shine—to feel myself—at last—so entirely passée—it was too much for my constitution—always delicate—though you never would allow it, Jane!"

She was in, as her friend saw, for an attack of pneumonia, that veritable plague of the New England winter, and her danger was not to be denied. Mrs. Rothery and Ruth were in almost constant attendance upon her during the next week, and the elder lady had occasion once more, as she had done in her own almost forgotten case, to remark the wonderful tact and efficiency in a sick-room of gentle, visionary Ruth. The young girl was by no means released from attendance when the crisis of Miss Ingestre's attack had been favorably passed, for the latter was weak and whimsical, and childish to an almost unexampled degree, and Jane, despite her long familiarity with illness and the undoubted sincerity of her concern, was felt by the supersensitive patient to be cold and peremptory.

So the time ran on to the middle of March, while the education of Constance progressed rapidly under the tutorship of Ardashteff. Stanton, who had made several flying trips to New York since his long visit at the holidays, was again gone there. Everybody protested that there was no serious trouble with old Mr. St. John, but he seemed to have become a confirmed valetudinarian, and could not bear his grandson out of his sight. "It's a bore," wrote honest Stanton, "having to be away so long; but you must just take it easy, my sweetheart, for the fact is that I can see, whatever the doctors may say, that dear old grandsire is not at all up to the mark, and I should be a brute to leave him while he feels so low." And Constance turned the note over, and began elaborately printing from memory upon the blank leaf the thirtysix characters of the Russian alphabet, which Ardashteff had undertaken to teach her.

It chanced that she had confided to her lover, immediately on Ardashteff's arrival, in a closely written note of four sarcastic pages, her first unfavorable impression of the stranger, and Stanton had giggled over her wit, and even retailed some of it to his grandfather, in the hope of cheering the dull and drooping spirits of the old gentleman, adding his own comfortable conviction that Major Wallis's grand Russian comrade was "a kind of a muff" after all.

And Ruth, being now absorbed in her Lenten services and her daily sittings with Miss Ingestre,

and Amory in Ruth to such a degree as to occasion many a covert smile and dry comment on the part of the men and women of his own generation, it was Jane, of course, who first clearly perceived the signs of a new danger in the air.

She found one day upon the drawing-room carpet (a new one!) an untidy scattering of papers, which proved to be fragments of one of the Russian exercises aforesaid. A flagrant indifference on the part of Constance both to Stanton's protracted absence and its serious occasion were the next bad symptoms noted by the able practitioner; but still she held her tongue, and wondered how long that mooning pair, whom all this concerned so much more nearly than it did herself, would continue in senseless oblivion. In the end, however, conscience got the better of temper, and one day Jane spoke out.

She knocked at the door of her brother's private room, obeyed his pleasant invitation to enter, seated herself with decision, and said without preliminaries, "How much longer, Amory, do you expect your Russian friend to remain with us?"

He looked up from his writing a little surprised. "I asked him for no definite time. I like him to stay while he enjoys it, do you not? Does n't he make himself agreeable?"

"He does indeed," answered Jane, emphatic-

ally. "Quite sufficiently so!"

Her tone startled Major Wallis into alert attention. "Why, what do you mean?" he said quickly, and Mrs. Rothery made significant answer.

"I have just come from a call on Estelle, who had a letter from New York this morning, saying among other things that old Mr. St. John's death is expected from hour to hour."

"Impossible!" cried Amory. "He has not been dangerously ill. Constance would surely have known. She hears almost every day."

Mrs. Rothery kept her voice strenuously subdued while she replied: "I naturally spoke to her at once, and what I learned was that she had not found time as yet to read or even open Stanton's last two letters." She paused for an instant as her brother uttered an exclamation of wonder, then continued: "She kindly offered the epistles to me with the seals unbroken, but I felt it would hardly be fair to their author for me to take them. I then spoke of the news which they probably contained, which appeared not deeply to interest her." Perceiving at this point that her brother was quite as deeply startled as she could possibly have desired, Jane added hastily, "But I am interrupting you. Excuse me! The news is grave, and Constance's manner was so very odd that I could not refrain from mentioning it." She retreated as she spoke, and with her last words closed the door of Amory's room behind her, resolute as ever to avoid all discussion of his ward's affairs.

Major Wallis was left in a state of consternation. A few moments of agitated reflection made the point of his sister's insinuations alarmingly clear to him. He could only hope desperately that prejudice might have led her into a mistake; but what, between his obligations to his ward and his guest, it might behoove him to do, was no easy matter to decide.

He knew that Ruth had been as unsuspicious as himself, and that Jane would say no more: to Constance he could not make up his mind at once to apply; and the only remaining course, that of seeking an explanation from Alexis himself, was sufficiently unpalatable. Upon this, however, he soon decided. He went out and waylaid the Russian, and invited him to come and have a cigar in his own sanctum, a request so common as to excite no surprise. But when the door had closed behind the two, and they were seated face to face, the elder turned upon the younger man a look of such grave inquiry as immediately to announce to the latter the fact that this was no ordinary occasion. Insouciant Alexis had in fact been marveling for some time that day after day was allowed to pass without his being called to account. He now perceived that his hour was come, and with instinctive strategy he boldly anticipated his antagonist's movement, and, abruptly turning his flank, "Major," he broke out, with every appearance of the most admirable candor, "it is no affair of mine, perhaps, and you may well tell me not to mix myself in it; but I must say that the barbarity of handing over that younger ward of yours - so beautiful and gifted a creature - to a boor who has nothing to recommend him, absolument, except his wealth, — the barbarity of this, I say, was never equaled in the old world!"

"There is no question of 'handing over,' " an-

swered Amory coldly.

"Perhaps not, technically, just as there's no question — technically — of parents' wishes, or marriage settlements, or anything but the fancy of the fiancées themselves. Oh, I know your American theories of marriage, mon ami, and I know that practically you are as gigantic a humbug in that as in most other respects."

"In this case, however, you are mistaken. The engagement to which you refer came about precisely in the theoretical American fashion."

"Miss Constance's present sentiments seem to me distinctly European," retorted Alexis with curling lip and slight shrug of the shoulders.

"Have you been discussing the matter with

her?" demanded Amory sharply.

"And if I had? I considered it a family compact, such as those to which I have been all my life accustomed, and in such, after they are consummated at least, the uncongeniality of the husband is the staple topic of the wife's conversation. If "—he stopped Amory's incipient interruption with a deprecatory wave of his taper fingers — "if, as you say, it was an arrangement of the young people themselves, it was made at their pleasure, to be ended at their pleasure, n'est-ce pas? And I should say any one who hastened the end would be doing them both a kindness. You cannot think,

you dare not say, that they are fit to insure one another's happiness?"

"Your zeal in this cause appears to me to have been misplaced," Amory answered. "Constance had a true attachment to her boy lover, which you, I must conclude, have been deliberately trying to undermine. Was it well done of a man of the world like yourself? What can ever indemnify her for the loss of her artless first love?"

The answer was prompt, perfectly serious, and wholly unexpected: "Her deeper love for me and mine for her. Break, or let her break, this ridiculous boy-and-girl engagement, which is no true betrothal, and give her to me: you shall not repent it!"

The color sprang into Amory's bronzed face as he replied, with considerable warmth, "How can you venture to make such a proposition to me, who know by your own confession what your life has been, and what your views of women are? Your contempt for the sex has been your habitual boast."

"I do not despise Miss Constance; I respect her."

"Oh, but the shadow of your past life cleaves to you! — I will not complete the quotation! And Constance is but a wayward child, while you" —

"Are more years your junior than Miss Constance that of your fiancée," completed Alexis, with a peculiarly soft and deliberate enunciation which indicated that his temper was rising. "And, since we have come to personalities, Major, let me re-

mind you that there are points of view. I do not at all see," he added, rather hardily, "why my past liaisons should be the impediment to my marriage which you seem to consider them. On the other part, it would be little less than revolting to me to think of marrying the daughter of a woman with whom I had once been passionately, though ever so blamelessly, in love, whereas you seem to consider it perfectly natural. Concede that there are points of view!"

Amory attempted no answer, and, after a watchful pause, the other continued, more earnestly than ever: "Think of this carefully, and be not hasty to decide. I say again, I love her, and I would be to her a good husband, and she loves me better than, in her adorable inexperience, she knows herself. You should have much confidence in your own wisdom to resolve on keeping us apart."

A deep silence fell upon the pair, and lasted, neither could have told how long. The cloudy day was closing in, when at last Amory spoke. "Have you presumed to say anything to my ward; I mean, have you gone the length, under my roof, of speaking of love to her?"

Ardashteff's eyes flashed, but he commanded his voice perfectly. "No," he replied, "not yet."

"Then go away at once, without another word to Constance. The harm you have carelessly or wilfully done may not yet be irreparable. If it is only a passing fancy you have kindled, it will die out in your absence" — Alexis shook his head

emphatically, but he instantly rose to his feet. "If, alas! it is otherwise," Amory went on sadly, "pardon me, Ardashteff, —you know it would be a misfortune, —why, then, she has an impetuous nature; she will throw poor Stanton over in any case."

He paused, and Alexis said, very quietly, "Then I shall come back."

The Russian left Boston the following day. Amory would have been glad to feel perfectly sure that he had found no opportunity in that short interval for exchanging another private word with Constance, but who could foresee all the devices of so adroit a creature? He talked airily at the breakfast-table of the excellence of abrupt leave-takings. "No long, lingering adieux for me—ever," he said. He spoke vaguely of hoping to see them all once more before he should leave for the old world. "And after all," he added, "I may finally plant myself here. Who knows? I am so strongly tempted at times!"

He rather wondered at his own prompt and ostensibly amiable acquiescence in Major Wallis's unwelcome and inhospitable suggestion. "But if," said the born fatalist to himself, "she is for me, I shall have her surely, whether I go or stay." As he drove away from the door, a boy in a jaunty uniform mounted the steps, and delivered to Major Wallis a telegram from Judge Ford announcing the death of Stanton St. John, Sen.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AMORY went to New York to attend Mr. St. John's funeral, and even the mitigated gayeties of Lent came definitively to an end in Butternut Street. Nobody had testified any surprise at the violent agitation shown by Constance when informed of the old gentleman's death. She made one or two ineffectual efforts to control herself, then burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing, and hurried out of the room. Mrs. Rothery suspected that her emotions might be complex; Amory knew too well that they were so; but to Ruth her sister's great distress appeared altogether natural, sharpened, as she fancied it must be, by compunction at the thought that in the whirl of her daily life she had remained strangely insensible both to Stanton's anxiety and his grandfather's danger. Ruth tried to go and comfort Constance in her gay little chamber; for in town the sisters were lodged separately now, and the bower of the younger presented an extraordinary chaos of parti-colored adornment, - flowers, photographs, trophies of dancing-cards tied up with gay ribbons, lace draperies, bright garments strewn untidily about, and decorative embroidery. But the door of this retreat was bolted when Ruth reached it, and her gentle pleadings to be admitted were denied in smothered but still peremptory tones.

Within, upon her low, luxurious bed, Constance lay face downward in an agony of miserable rebellion. She tried for a while to cheat even herself into the belief that she was weeping for old Mr. St. John. "He liked me, he believed in me, and now he is gone! It is always the way with my friends! Ruth has everything, and I have nothing, - nothing that I am allowed to keep! She is better than I am, and she is handsomer, but people have liked me best! Papa did, and Shippie, and — Alexis!" Her betrothed was actually forgotten for a moment, while she lingered on the dearer name, and stretched her hands out wildly after the coldhearted refugee. Then suddenly she experienced a great shock, and found herself trying, angrily but vainly, to silence the unmistakable voice within her, - the voice which Ardashteff had so effectually taught her not to call her conscience. "You have Stanton still, who loves you dearly and trusts you utterly, and to him you are bound by the most sacred of all ties."

Constance would not hear; she could not bear it. She began to shiver from head to foot, although the morning was mild and her open fire burned brightly; and, seizing the gaudy pink silk duvet from her disordered bed, she went and knelt close by the grate, until a loose tress of her long, dark hair was literally singed by the heat, and curled up with a sharp hiss and a sickening odor. Constance drew back

instinctively and pulled herself into a low chair, where she sat long with wide eyes fixed upon the consuming coals, and vainly searching the whole small circuit of her horizon for a ray of hope. All was black: Alexis gone without a single tender reassuring word, without the faintest intimation that he had been more than selfishly amusing himself by the study of a new "type!" - gone, leaving to the poor little playmate, or rather plaything, of his passing day, only this bitter thought for consolation, - that she ought to be thankful he had said no more, since otherwise she must have nerved herself to speak the word which would have separated them forever. He must have gone in any case after that, and poor Constance endeavored to find some solace in the reflection that then he would have gone despising her, while now he might never know. The acute girl understood perfectly well that her crowning charm in the eyes of the sophisticated worldling had lain in what he believed to be her infantile innocence and inexperience, and that the telling of her true story would have terribly defaced his ideal. A chilling thought indeed, but the child tried — forlornly — to find support in it. And then, in mocking contrast to her late disloyal and ill-omened delight, came the picture of Stanton, heavy-footed, slow-witted, blundering Stanton, - the man to whom she was bound, with whom she was to pass her life, her whole, interminable life, and she eighteen! And Stanton was in trouble now, and he would want her to be affectionate when he came, and sympathetic, and to pet him, — O heavens!

It was all of no use! There was no way out of the maddening maze; and when at last Constance emerged from her seclusion, and joined Mrs. Rothery and Ruth at the lunch table, — for Amory was already off, — the two were almost equally startled by the change in her appearance. She was very pale; her voice, when she spoke, was low and husky, and she seemed barely able to lift a little way, from time to time, her discolored and heavily drooping eyelids. Ruth watched her with eyes of yearning solicitude; and the moment the sisters were left alone in the drawing-room, she came and knelt beside Constance, and began softly chafing her ice-cold hands.

"Do not take it so despairingly!" she whispered. "You are blaming yourself, sweet, for not having realized, but perhaps he forbade Stanton to tell. No one would have been so sorry as he to distress you and curtail your pleasures. He was an old man, too"—

"Old!" interrupted Constance fiercely, "what do you mean?" Then, pulling her hand from Ruth's caressing clasp, and dropping again into a dull and listless attitude, she murmured, "Oh, yes, of course! You were speaking of Mr. St. John."

In a species of consternation which rendered her insensible even to the wound of her sister's repulse, Ruth rose to her feet. "Why, Connie!" she began. "Don't speak! You don't understand! You don't know anything about me, and never did"—

The eyes of the elder sister filled with tears of pain. The other saw it and softened. "Forgive me, Ruthie! I am very harsh and very bad."

"Only very unhappy, dear love," said Ruth, hurriedly, but with a world of sweetness. "Oh, yes, believe me, I do understand. I see what you meant just now. You were thinking of poor Stanton."

"Yes," Constance answered slowly, and in a rather strange voice, "I—was thinking—of poor Stanton. But I don't want to talk, please, and you must n't mind my saying so."

She had no more outbursts after this; and to the girls of her "set," whom sympathy or curiosity led to call in rather unusual numbers during the next few days, her subdued manner seemed so unexpectedly and entirely the proper thing under the circumstances that they were considerably impressed. Only that more mature maiden, who had first provoked rash Constance into attempting the conquest of Ardashteff, declared that she was too proper by half. "You need not tell me that she is so very deeply afflicted by the death of that old gentleman in New York. Has n't that boor, to whom they engaged her before ever she appeared, come into no end of money?"

Amory returned, bringing a letter to Constance, very long for Stanton, and he spoke with earnest warmth of the unaffected sorrow and altogether manly bearing of the young fellow. Judge Ford was the sole executor of his old friend's very simple testament, but Stanton would inevitably be detained in New York by business connected with the settling of his grandfather's estate, and Amory added that he should himself be obliged, within a fortnight or so, to return thither for a few days. He watched Constance a little anxiously while he spoke, but the quality of the girl was telling. She had collected her forces by this, and her manner betrayed nothing. She was pale, certainly, but that might well be the result of the wear and tear of the gay season, followed by the enforced seclusion of the last few days. Amory then inquired for Estelle, and learned that she had ordered herself, or rather cajoled her physician into ordering her, an ocean voyage. She gained strength very slowly, was restive under confinement, and wanted change, - above all things, to escape the protracted rigors of the North American spring.

"She is going to Bonchurch, on the Isle of Wight," Ruth said, "and hopes to be able to sail next week, though she has not yet been out at all. But she sits up almost all day, and is very impatient to see you, Amory" (Ruth pronounced the name quite unconsciously now). "I am going to sit with her this afternoon. Can you not call for me there,—say at about five,—and see her first, and then take me for a little walk before dinner?"

"Of course I can! My love to Estelle, and say that I will come."

Even Ruth hardly realized, having seen her every day, what a pale and shrunken image of her old exuberant self poor Estelle had suddenly become. The curious likeness to a large wax-doll persisted still, but it was one of those wan, superannuated dolls, discrowned and yellow, who are thrust into nursery corners by heartless little iconoclasts, whom she resembled now, and Estelle herself perceived the fact, and deplored it with comical unreserve. Ruth found her reclining among clouds of blue upon a couch which had been so turned that it faced a broad eastward-looking window, and intently studying her own appearance in an ivory-framed hand mirror.

She dropped the glass to embrace her darling, but immediately took it up again, and resumed her unsparing scrutiny. The desperate character of her reflections was made apparent by the revolutionary tenor of her next remark: "I am become a ridiculous fright! Do you think it would make any difference if I were to take to pink?" Then, seeing that Ruth hesitated, she went on to say: "I don't mean a pale shell-pink at all, nor yet a pure rose-pink. Of course not! You think me a fool in your heart, I dare say, you demure and blooming young creature! But I know too much for that! I mean a deep, warm, golden, Oriental pink. Don't answer in a hurry, but think it over carefully, there's a dear! and tell me later, for I want to speak of something else."

Ruth flung aside her mantle, and sat down by the invalid, observing, as she did so, that Amory had returned, and was coming to see her by and by.

"Very nice of him," said Estelle, amiably, "and I am particularly glad, since what I want to say concerns you both. Now don't blush, because that gives you such a complexion that it seems ungenerous. I'll tell you first, my love, and you can talk it over with him - with Amory - afterwards. Dear me! I should never, I suppose, not if I were to live to be an old, old lady, - but there, I forget! what am I now? - never in all my life could I learn to think naturally of you two in that relation. Not that it signifies in the least whether I do or do not! My woman's heart, forever faithful to the past, is my own inheritance. With men, as I began to learn before you were born, my sweet, the case is entirely different! However, what I wanted to say was this: It is impossible for me to tell, you know, exactly how long I shall be absent. It must depend upon whether I really do gain rapidly and recover - as, after all, I fancy I shall - some portion of my old spirit, some ray of my old looks."

"Oh, yes, Estelle, dear" (Ruth had tact enough to have learned to call her old friend also, in these days, by her Christian name), "I feel confident that you will."

"But my chest always was delicate, although Jane Rothery would never believe it! Still, I think so, too, and in that case I shall come home in August at the latest. And my hope is — I have quite a strong fancy about it — that the marriage will not take place until after that."

"The marriage? What marriage?"

"Why, yours and your guardian's, of course! The other bridegroom is barely out of knicker-bockers!"

Ruth felt an obscure pang, into which there entered somehow both terror and self-reproach. "Estelle," she said quickly, "I never think of our marriage!"

"Then, my love, it is high time you did! I have fancied that that was the way of it,—that you were both dawdling along in a Dante and Beatrice sort of a fashion,—a lofty dream of perpetual courtship. So natural for you, my angelic girl, and so inveterately like him! But it ought not to last beyond autumn at the latest, and I shall tell him so"—

"O Miss Ingestre, — Estelle," Ruth began with painful earnestness, "I beseech you" — And at that moment Amory's card was brought in.

Estelle did not fulfil her threat. She told Amory of her own summer plan; and when he asked what had made her think of Bonchurch, she replied that it was a long and very interesting letter she had had, only a few days before, from Horatio Forney. "He has quite taken up his abode at Ventnor," she said. "He has gathered there a small congregation of highly cultivated

Dissenters, to whom he preaches regularly,—and what he said about the beauty and salubrity of the region revived my own memories of it, and made

me quite long to go."

Amory, too, had his memories of Ventnor, for he had passed there the first winter of his invalid voyagings, years before, - the winter which he himself had so earnestly hoped that he might not survive, the winter which Jane had — so to speak -dragged him through. He could face the thought without anguish now, and he and Estelle began assisting one another to recall the curiously individual charm of the landscape of the ancient Vectis, - the fringe of almost tropical vegetation along the edge of the solemn sea, and inland the broad sweep of undulating grain-land; the immemorial churches and granges, hoary, mossy, sinking with age into the soil, with here and there dim traces of an earlier than any Christian civilization, - the relics dropped upon the all-conquering way of Julius and of Vespasian. Ruth sat by and listened, fascinated by the picture their words evoked in her own mind. The momentary pain was gone.

When she and Amory finally went out together into the narrow old Boston street, the tardy dusk of later March was falling softly. The air was warm and caressing, as though the spring of those parts were no mere mocking fable: the leaf-buds were visibly swollen upon all the fine old trees, which the hand of the latter-day Vandal had not

yet assailed. Nowhere is the first faint sigh of the reviving season exhaled with so impassioned a sweetness as in these grim northern lands. The year will sleep again after that thrilling moment, long it may be and deeply; but to know beyond a doubt that life is in it seems enough for gratitude and all tender hopes. Out of the very depth of her happiness Ruth sighed.

"What is it, dearest?"

"Only the twilight, Amory, and the being out in it with you." He pressed her hand fervently. "And that feeling, almost of glee, one always has when one fancies that the winter is over and gone, and the time of the singing of birds come; and the voice of the turtle,—I used always to think, when I was little, that that meant the tuning up of the frogs in the marshy lands, on the first dark nights of spring. All you and Estelle have been saying about the Isle of Wight has given me such a longing for the country and the shore! I wish we were going down there directly."

"And why should we not?" said Amory.
"Upon my word, I think it would be the best possible move! We are all a little worn with our toil of pleasure this winter, Connie especially; have you not thought so?"

He tried to observe Ruth's expression, but could not, for the fast gathering shadows. Her voice, however, told him with affecting clearness how free she was from any arrière-pensée. "Yes, indeed, Amory. Her looks have quite troubled me;

but you know she is such a high-spirited little dear, and never will complain, and rather resents your sympathy. And now that she cannot go out any more, it is dull for her, of course. She had, you know, such a deal of admiration. It is dangerous, perhaps, but it must be very fascinating, very exciting" (Ruth had never so much as thought whether she herself were admired or no). "A change would surely be good for Connie, and I almost fancy that she, too, would like to go to the shore early."

"There will be cold, rough weather after this, of course," Amory returned.

"Yes, but after the sea begins to be purple in the mornings and evenings, the outlook is never really gloomy that way. However, I must not be selfish. It is just a fancy that has gotten hold of me, perhaps, because of your talk with Miss Ingestre, and because the evening is so mild. We must see whether Mrs. Rothery would like it, and Connie. Ah, by the way, did you not say that Stanton would have soon to come to the villa? It would be too sad for him to be there quite alone."

"He told me so," Amory answered, hardly knowing whether he were more relieved or perturbed by Ruth's calm unconsciousness. "And I think I can answer for Jane. As for Connie, I will speak with her myself this very evening."

CHAPTER XXV.

NEITHER Mrs. Rothery nor Constance offered any active resistance to the proposal for an early removal to the seaside. It was the lovers themselves who began to fear lest they had been a little hyper-romantic when the first week of April brought the worst snow-storm of the season, and the day fixed for their flitting had to be altered on account of the unexpected blockade of all the country roads. At this point Mrs. Rothery came forward and insisted — it need hardly be said, a little grimly — that her plans for the arrangement of the household could not be again unmade, and that go they must, as soon as the ways were practicable, which accordingly they did. It was at least matter of common congratulation among them that Miss Ingestre had accomplished her intention, and sailed for Liverpool the previous Saturday.

The weather continued cold until the middle of the month. The snow yielded slowly; the skies were gray, the east winds bitter. To Constance the gloom of the time and place became well-nigh insupportable. The undeniable wretchedness of her looks, together with her persistent depression and highly irritable temper, convinced Mrs. Rothery that it was a case for tonics; and after a brief struggle against iron and quinine, Constance consented, though sullenly, to be treated as an invalid. It would forestall inquiry, she reflected with some cynicism; give Ruth an object in life distinct from Amory; and save her — Constance — trouble, upon the whole. So the impulsive and hitherto indefatigable girl would sometimes lie for hours upon her couch, motionless, as if under a spell, and gazing, between the naked vine-sprays that shivered along the veranda front, over the waste of sodden grass to where the pallid sky-line touched the leaden sea.

As the days grew into weeks and there were no tidings whatever of Ardashteff, she experienced something like a revulsion of feeling in Stanton's favor. Come what might, he must never guess that anybody else—she tried not even to name Alexis in her heart—had trifled with her affections, and had power so to wound and humiliate her. She began to wish, in her desolation and the seeming impossibility of confiding her trouble, that even Stanton were there, and to make wild resolves that, though her heart should break, she would perform her whole duty by him; and from that time she wrote to him with a frequency which did much, for the moment, to allay the fears of Amory.

Her artificial courage seemed all to fail her, however, when, in the latter days of May, the coy and tantalizing spring having at last fully come, Stanton wrote that there was a let-up in business at last, thank God! and that he should be coming immediately to open the villa. There was no trace of his late sorrow about him when he did arrive, except his mourning dress, and the very slightest added touch, perhaps, of self-importance; and the slender flame of poor Constance's fictitious self-devotion sank and expired at the sight of him.

Amory noticed that she shrank from her lover's kiss of welcome, and the fancy that she was paler than ever, on the first evening after Stanton's return, reawakened all his anxieties, and cost him a night of bitter musing. Had he once more made a deplorable mistake? Was there a fate in these things after all, and a foredoomed issue in distress and disaster of any affair of the heart with which he might have to do? Had he helped to destroy his younger ward's chances of happiness, first by a foolish compliance, and then by a misplaced severity; and was he at the same time annihilating the one hope of a noble and honorable issue to the erratic career of his Russian friend? He queried and doubted deeply in his heart, and came at last almost to the resolve that he would overcome his reluctance to discussing it all with Ruth. He hated most of all the sense of so grave a secret between him and her.

"Oh, I say, Con," burst out Stanton on the following day, when the *fiancés* had been left alone together, "you're looking wretchedly ill, you know, —not like the same girl. What's the matter?" Constance forced a smile. "Perhaps I got more tired than I realized in the winter when we were going out so much. I don't feel quite like myself."

"I should think not! I say, has she — Madam, I mean — been particularly disagreeable?"

"No," Constance answered, trying her cowardly best to appear as usual. "You know she's never exactly what you would call sweet."

"Sweet! Well, scarcely! But look here: I've an idea!" Stanton had hitherto been rather timid about propounding his own original notions to Constance, and now he paused abruptly, and then proceeded with some diffidence: "You can't think how lonely and big both the houses seem without grandfather."

"You must miss him," she murmured, "but it will be better when you get back to college."

"That's just it! I'm not going back."

"What do you mean?" She turned on him almost fiercely, yet with a sickening presentiment of what was to follow.

"No," said Stanton, a little doggedly. "I'm not going back. It's always been a sham, you know, my pretending to study; and I've lots of other things to attend to now, and it's nobody's business any longer. Ain't I free, white, and twenty-one? The long and short of the matter is, I see no good in it."

"No good to be gained by a Harvard degree?"

"I would n't give that for the degree, except on

grandfather's account; and he knows now, if he knows anything about it at all, that I have n't the shadow of a right to it. Why do you look so horrified, Con? Is it because you fancy that you don't believe in immortality and that sort of thing?"

"I don't believe in anything!" she cried out

despairingly.

"Now look here, little girl! You're not well. You're just upset, rundown,—whatever they call it. That's what's the matter with you, I see it all! You've been left alone, so to speak — for two spoons like Ruth and the Major don't count — down here with nothing going on for six mortal weeks, and upon my word I should hardly have known you! And I'm going to put a stop to it! I am going to Major Wallis this very morning, to tell him the exact facts of the case."

Constance cast wildly about for some opposing argument. "Oh, no, you must n't! Don't, please! I could n't bear it now." Then, seeing, or fancying that she saw, his expression of blank bewilderment deepening to a decided frown, she made haste to add, "You know, Stan dear, there will be such a horrible row whenever it does come out!"

His face cleared. "You don't look fit for a shindy by a good deal!" he said, compassionately, and Constance pursued her advantage.

"It would be dreadful! And Guardian would

insist on hunting up that man."

"Well, he won't find him in a hurry," Stanton

answered, "for the man is dead. I saw it in the paper ten days ago, and was meaning to tell you."

"O Stanton, are you sure it was he?"

"Dead sure! I took pains to find out! But it won't make any difference," he hastened to say, seeing Constance look, as he thought, anxious and terrified. "You've got the proof. By George, Connie! you are n't crying?"

"I can't bear it! I can't bear it!" she sobbed, with a half-formed impulse to tell him all. But her good angel was drowsing, perhaps, and the moment passed.

"Well, well! We'll have a ceremony in any case," the youth continued. "I always thought it would be better."

Temporizing Constance clutched at the reprieve. "Much better and simpler in every way," she said with another ghastly little smile, "but it could not be just yet, you know, out of respect to your grandfather. Guardian would never consent, and I should not wish it myself. Mr. St. John was so punctilious about everything," she went on, barely conscious of her own hypocrisy, "that it would seem specially bad."

She presently contrived to send Stanton away, on the plea of a headache, which her wan looks made more than plausible. The conversation had made him vaguely uneasy, but he persuaded himself with little difficulty that Constance, who was always so clever, — "cute" he probably called it, — must know best, and that, at all events, his first duty was to cheer her up.

Left to herself, the poor child wandered restlessly about the house and grounds, trying to reconsider once more her present position, and unable to do so from the very intensity of her distress. Ruth and her guardian had gone out with a book to a sheltered spot upon the beach, for the May afternoon was beautiful. They had begged Constance to go with them, and she had replied by inquiring listlessly what they were going to read, and adding a pettish refusal after the too serious volume had been shown her. She wondered now if the day would ever end; and her entire absence of appetite, when at last they all met at dinner, having been once too often remarked, she begged irritably enough to be let alone, then rose with a hurried apology on the score of her headache, and fled to the long chamber at the back of the house, — the chamber of so many memories.

A species of miserable fascination drew her footsteps to that one window of which the sight had long been hateful, and kneeling down beside it, she gazed out into the too familiar shrubbery, now clothed in a diaphanous growth of golden green, and exhaling the most delicate odors of the vernal time. But her thoughts turned backward. One by one the years of her brief life arose out of the past, and defiled before her in a strange procession. The brighter they had been in passing, the more cruelly they seemed to mock her, for had they not combined in leading up to the last?

"To blame — to blame!" a passionless voice, as

of some unpitying monitor stationed behind her chair, seemed incessantly to repeat; "it is you yourself who have been always to blame. The trap into which you have fallen was of your own wanton setting. Fancy only, if you can, how Ruth would have acted in your place. Irreverent, self-sufficient, you have taken your own way, in defiance of the world, and this is the end! Here, and here, and here, you had a chance, a choice was offered you, but you would look neither behind nor before. You cared for nothing but the silly triumph or stupid comfort of the moment."

But Constance hated the self-accusing voice which had for once forced her to listen. "Well, well," she seemed to answer, "say that I have done wrong. I own it! Is not that enough? Now show me a way of escape from this dreadful coil." But to this appeal no answer was returned.

Almost at the same instant, Ruth entered the room, a vision of tranquil beauty. "What, Connie! not in bed?" she asked in some surprise.

"No; I sat down here and fell a-thinking. Has it been long?"

"Rather long for a day-dream, I should say! Now tell me, dear," coaxingly, "what was it all about?"

"I was thinking," Constance began slowly, feeling her heart beat violently, as the often rejected notion recurred once more; "oh, if I might only tell, Ruth! — I was thinking," and she feebly tried to feel her way, "how few people in the world are happy, and how cruel it is."

Ruth became grave in an instant. "Not cruel," she said, imploringly, "let us not say cruel, Connie, but sad — yes, and very strange. Only, perhaps, if we could see farther"—

Constance interrupted her. "We could prevent a good deal, I suppose. Yes, of course, every one ought to be happy."

But Ruth shook her head. "In a way — in the way of obedience — but not in the way of having all that we desire."

"You have all that you desire," Constance retorted bitterly, her half-formed resolution flaming away in sudden anger. "So you ought not to preach."

"I did not mean to preach, indeed I did not, or only to myself! O Con, if you could guess how my happiness frightened me! I know — I know it is wrong for me to have it, and that the punishment must come! And what I dread most — the worst of all — would be some terrible suffering to some one I loved, oh, far, far better than myself" —

Ruth's voice had fallen almost to a whisper. She was thinking of Amory only, and had half forgotten her eager auditor, until Constance broke in with wild agitation. "Oh, hush, hush! How can you say such horrible things, and still pretend to love me? Don't say another word! You will kill me if you do!" and it was long before the terrified Ruth could restore her even to a semblance of composure.

Stanton did not find his presence altogether so

enlivening to his betrothed as he had hoped, and he exhausted himself in good-natured devices for her amusement. After trying in vain all the pastimes in which they had once delighted, the happy thought occurred to him that he might go to Boston and buy her a present.

He made an expedition to the city the very next day, and returned laden with a chain and pendant so graceful in design and so exquisite in workmanship that Constance uttered a cry of delight. Stanton was entirely satisfied.

"I'm awfully glad they suit you," he said with boyish candor; "but really it's no thanks to me. I'd been the round of the places pretty thoroughly, and had all but settled on a thing rather bigger than that, - more of it, you know, - when whom should I meet on the street but that Russian fellow who was staying with you so long last winter, and I stopped him and recalled myself to him. It was as much as ever he seemed to know me. Well; and so while we were talking it came over me that he was just the sort of lady's man to know the correct thing in ornaments, and I told him what I wanted, and then asked him to come along and give me the benefit of his taste, and he pounced upon this thing straight away; and it is pretty, I think, although it 's rather small."

"It is perfect," said Constance. She could not trust herself to say more, and Stanton went on cheerfully: "He asked me lots of questions about you all. I fancy he thought you would be still in town. I told him how it happened; though, in point of fact, you'd have left by this time anyway; and he gave me a note for the major. Where is it, I wonder?" Stanton began searching his numerous pockets in their order, but without immediate success. "I know the gist of it," he observed provisionally. "It was to say that he would come down here to-morrow, and dine and sleep, if the major could put him up. I told him, if he could n't, to come to me, for I've rooms enough in all conscience."

At last the missing document was found, and Stanton trudged off to deliver it to Amory, leaving Constance to a whirl of emotion.

The note was brief, and Major Wallis read it gravely; then, with no perceptible hesitation, but as though he had decided beforehand how to act in such a case, he wrote on a telegraph slip a civil form of invitation, dispatched it by a servant, and then informed his sister of what he had done.

Jane eyed him keenly for a moment, and a question seemed starting to her lips, but she suppressed it. "Very well," was all her answer. "He can sleep here, of course;" and she turned away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The seaside cottage was Mrs. Rothery's castle. In town, as we have seen, she was never thoroughly at home. Nobody cared less for critical eyes than she; but in circumspect Boston she always knew that they were upon her. In the summer, her course was free, her magistracy firmly established; and the simple summer dwelling was, as has been said in the beginning of this tale, her own creation. She had drawn with her own hand the original plans; and - wonderful experience for an amateur builder! - the result in lath and plaster had been exactly as satisfactory as the original conception upon paper. Many of Jane's pet theories had found visible expression in the unpretending but commodious cottage; and after twenty years of occupancy she admired it still, as a manifestation of herself. The fate of such pride is proverbial, and the hour of Mrs. Rothery's had come.

The wise-after-the fact conversed volubly, during the next few days, of wood-work dried to tinder by the exceptionally large fires which the early removal of the family to the seaside had rendered necessary that season. Certainly there had been a great heaping of logs upon the drawingroom hearth on the evening of Ardashteff's arrival, for an easterly gale had been blowing all day, and tearing off untimely the blossom of the trees. Jane, on the other hand, always maintained that a petroleum lamp had been overturned by one of the servants. What really happened no one ever knew, save that in the small hours of that night, the mistress of the dwelling, whose housewifely instincts were never wholly dormant, was awakened suddenly to the full possession of all her faculty for leadership by the ominous odor of smoking pine-wood.

She arose and aroused, one by one, the various members of the household, giving quickly to each, as she did so, a few curt and clear directions. Then she sent off a messenger to the town for help, though, aware by this time of the extent of the mischief, she knew it to be of little use. Finally she superintended in the most efficient manner the work of Amory and his friend in removing some few papers and other small valuables, by which time the front of the house was beginning to blaze; and the little party gathered upon the lawn, and, now increased by Stanton, could do no more than look on while the destroyer completed his work.

As the red light suddenly irradiated the group, Mrs. Rothery ran her eye over it, and exclaimed sharply, "Constance — I do not see Constance!"

They turned to one another in sudden consternation, and the horrible fact became patent to them all that Constance was not there.

"Who saw her last?"

"It was I," wailed Ruth. "We left together. I had her hand only a moment ago! I thought her close behind!"

Major Wallis and the Russian exchanged a glance of terrible meaning. As they had come out of the house for the last time, they had both seen the fall of the front staircase. "A ladder at the back," said Amory briefly. "The long chamber is not yet burning!" and he and Stanton started for the stables, the latter wringing his hands in a somewhat futile fashion, and cursing the firemen for their delay.

But Alexis forestalled them both. The wind had shifted to the south by this, and one corner of the cottage front was darkling still. By help of a sturdy vine, the Russian gained the extreme end of the veranda roof, which shook under his weight, and fell as he sprung from it to the sill of an upper window, fortunately standing open. He found himself in the very room where he had been sleeping twenty minutes before; and though the air of it was now thick with stifling smoke, he made his way through it by instinct to the back of the house. The atmosphere was clearer here, and on the floor of the long chamber he saw Constance kneeling rigidly, her long hair streaming loose, her face buried in her clasped hands.

He stepped forward and touched her softly. She sprang to her feet with a wild cry. "You here, too!" she gasped. "Oh, how? — why? I thought

you were safe with the rest! But perhaps there is time still. Go!"

"I came for you," he answered with the gentlest composure.

"For me! Oh, you are too brave, too good! But no, you should not have come. I wanted to be left! I came back on purpose; it would have been the easiest way. I could see it all—Oh, no!" She broke off with a sudden revulsion of terror as the sharp crackle of the nearing flames fell on her ears. "Don't leave me!" and she flung herself into his arms; "don't leave me to die alone!"

"My poor darling," said Alexis soothingly, and holding her still, "there is no danger worth mentioning for you or for me; but what there is we share. They will come for us."

She twined her trembling arms about his neck, and clung there tightly. "I thought," she said, with an infantile sob, "that you would never come again."

"And you wanted me - you loved me?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then you are mine," he said with intense meaning, and straining her closer to his heart, "and no power shall part us!"

She lay there for one instant, panting and smiling, like the triumphant wife of the ballad, on the verge of the deadly fall. Then a shout came up from below.

"Is she there? Do you hear?"
Constance sprang from the Russian's embrace,

while the latter answered clearly, "Yes, Major, all safe! Plant your ladder here!"

Amory was already halfway up. "Don't be afraid, Constance," he said. "Trust me," murmured Ardashteff in her ear, as he let go her hand.

Like one in a dream, Constance made her way down to where Amory received her, and bore her to her sister.

"Oh, thank God! — And you, too, Captain Ardashteff!" Ruth cried, covering Constance with kisses, and then burst out weeping for the first time, while Stanton danced about the pair.

"Look at me, can't you, Connie?" he begged, and left off waving his hat that he might wipe his eyes. "Just let me hear you say once that you are all right."

Constance lifted a look upon him in which Ruth fancied that she saw contempt. "Oh, speak to him, love," she whispered hurriedly, "he was so distressed. Every one cannot think quickly in danger."

Constance obeyed mechanically. "All right, Stan! Just a little dazed!"

"Good Lord, I should think so! It was a mad thing going back! What on earth did you do it for? Plucky fellow, the Russian, is n't he? I owe him one, anyhow?" And Stanton's voice broke again. But his excitement must needs exhale in volubility. "Now you're all coming home with me," he pursued, taking his betrothed under his arm. "It's no use staying here any longer! No use for any of you," he added, vaguely addressing the crowd which was now rapidly collecting. "Oh, I say, Connie," he whispered in her ear, "somebody wondered, when the major put the ladder up, whether you would ever dare come down! I did n't see the fun of it then, I can tell you; but it was rather a good joke, don't you think? — Why, why! what's this?" For, as the roof of the old home fell in and the flames rushed bellowing upward, Constance dropped in a dead faint upon the ground.

They carried her to the St. John villa, where, for the next few hours, her apparently critical condition absorbed the anxieties of all. She was roused from one swoon only to sink into another, and the little town doctor, when he came, looked frightened, and talked about pressure on the brain; but Mrs. Rothery insisted that there was no danger, and Ruth was in her element by her sister's bedside, all steady nerve and soft composure. The restoratives, directed by the one and administered by the other, took effect at last, and just as the sun came up red out of the sea, amid a chaos of flying clouds, and a stronger gust of the still violent southerly gale bore in at the wide-open windows a whiff of pungent smoke from the smouldering ruins hard by, the patient fell quietly and healthfully asleep.

Mrs. Rothery lingered for a few minutes, until the breathing of Constance had become perfectly regular; then "She will do now," she said, with unwonted softness, "and you had better lie down, too, Ruth, for a while."

The weary young watcher complied without a word, and stretched herself beside her sister, while Jane closed the windows quietly, drew the curtains and went out.

She looked in again at the end of half an hour, and found the two lying hand in hand, the one a little flushed, the other a little pale, but both still slumbering deeply, — much as she had seen them lying together, in the bed which was to have been Ruth's alone, on that winter night, almost seven years before, when they were first committed to her care.

Late in the afternoon, Amory got a message to the effect that Constance was up and dressed, and wanted to see her guardian alone.

He found her curled up in the corner of a damask-cushioned couch in the big state bedroom of the St. John villa. She replied to his tender inquiries almost curtly; and he, perceiving by his own invincible tact that his solicitude fretted her, and that she was nerving herself to a confession, of which he fancied that he foresaw all the purport, drew his chair close up to the couch, and folding her little hand in his, said, without further parley, "Well now, Connie, what is it in particular?"

"Guardian," said the girl quickly, "I cannot stay in this house another day."

He quietly bowed his comprehension of her feel-

ing, but did not immediately speak. The exciting events of the night before, the brave deed that Ardashteff had done, the sense of what they all owed him, the contrast between his bearing and poor Stanton's,—all these things had combined well-nigh to complete Amory's conversion to the cause of his friend, which he felt to be his ward's cause also. Still, the situation was most embarrassing.

"I think that I understand it all," he said at last, "and of course we must none of us remain here any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Is he gone?"

"You mean" -

"Alexis! Captain Ardashteff."

"No, not yet. He lingered to make sure that you were doing well."

"I am perfectly well. Can I not see him?"

"What, here, Constance?"

"You might at least let me thank him, I should think, for the life I owe to him."

"He has been thanked, Connie, never fear! We all know what we owe him." Amory's gentle voice faltered a little, and he lifted Constance's hand to his lips and kissed it solemnly. "But you—your first instinct was quite right, my dear, and you must not see Captain Ardashteff again in this house at all."

Constance pressed her quivering lips firmly together, and tried to keep back her tears. There was a hunted look in her still childish eyes that went to Amory's heart.

"I suppose I understand it all," he said, soothingly. "I have suspected for a long time now that you have discovered — that a deeper experience perhaps was teaching you that you had made a mistake about Stanton. Well, it is bad, of course, but it is not fatal. Nothing is fatal, except" — He paused, remembering with a strange pang that it was Cornelia's child to whom he spoke. "You will have to tell Stanton how it is, Constance," he added gravely; "and you must try not to admit any other thought till that is done."

He expected to see her look relieved; but instead, she drew her hand away from his, and wrung it, and almost writhed in her cushioned corner. "What is it?" he exclaimed in vague alarm. "Is there anything else? Have you not told me all?"

"Have I not told you enough?" was her retort.

"Only let us get away from here, and I will write him. I must have time to think!"

Amory nodded, and thought to divert her mind a little, and soothe her almost hysterical agitation, by saying in a matter-of-fact tone, "If we only knew where to go."

To his astonishment, Constance caught up his words. "I know where I want to go! I thought it all out before you came! O Guardian, will you?"

"How can I promise?" he said, lightly, although not at all liking the eager light in her eyes, and the feverish flush that seemed fixing itself in her cheek. "Tell me your scheme, and I will see."

Her answer was a startling one. "I want to go to that house you know, the old house on the Hudson, the house with the beautiful garden, — the one"—and her voice sank—"the one where mamma died."

Amory could not trust himself to speak at all.

"We own it, don't we, Ruthie and I? And I have always so longed to see it again, and she has, too. I remember Judge Ford saying, the last time he was with us, that it was vacant, and he must look out for another tenant this year. Don't you think we might all go there?"

"Perhaps," he answered, with recovered composure, a little surprised to find that he could himself perceive no practical objection to the plan. "Things cannot be decided in a moment, you know, but I will talk with Ruth and with Jane; and at all events, Connie, we will go up to town as soon as you are able."

He left her with an affectionate charge to be a good girl and go to sleep again; and having been waylaid by Stanton, and questioned about Constance's condition, he relieved the mind of that optimistic lover easily. He then sought out Ardashteff, and told him in friendly but decisive fashion that he had better return at once to town.

"I go," the Russian answered; "and when shall I return?"

"Not until we are settled in some other house than this."

Ardashteff bowed. "Precisely; I comprehend.

But understand also, Major," and though his manner was studiously subdued, there was a fire in his eye, and a fixity in his expression, which Amory had not seen there when they had first spoken of Constance together; "understand that she showed me her whole innocent heart last night, — that I claim her for my own, and dare you or any other man to take the responsibility of keeping us apart."

"I assume no such responsibility," Amory answered sadly; "but nominally, at least, she still belongs to another man, and he must be undeceived before you approach her. Do not think me unfeeling," he went on, grasping his friend's hand, "still less, ungrateful. You see yourself how it must be. I will summon you at the earliest possible moment."

"Do so, mon ami, for she is already mine! And do not keep me waiting too long," he added significantly, "for I may be recalled to Europe earlier than I had supposed. I will now make my adieux to the ladies and to my host."

Amory was prepared, by what Constance had said, to find Ruth agreeing, eagerly for her, to the notion of a summer on the Hudson, and in that house. By the most delicate movement of self-revelation she allowed him to discern that she loved the memory of the place far more than she feared it; and that she had longed, for his sake chiefly, to see it again, because it was there that he had first come into her life, in the guise of some strong and kind angel, winning her heart, almost

before she knew that she had one, by his exquisite sympathy, and the dazzle of that old beauty of his, now so nobly marred.

From Jane he had counted, almost desperately, on opposition to the plan; but even she rather favored it than otherwise. Even she, he perceived, in her own dry fashion had been curious to behold that fateful spot. He felt like a swimmer who foresees that he shall be mastered by the undertow against which he strives.

- "Very well," he said at last, "I will consult Judge Ford, and see whether the plan is practicable. But meanwhile"—
- "Meanwhile," Jane interrupted, "we must instantly remove from here. You need not give yourself the trouble of explaining, Amory. I see it all. Constance is now perfectly convinced that she never loved and never can love anybody but the man who saved her life, and she wishes to be off with Stanton St. John."
- "I believe, indeed, that she was too unformed to know her mind last year."
 - "What did I tell you at the time?"
- "You were right, sister," said Amory with quiet dignity, "and I was wrong."
- "And how about your foreign friend? Are you sure of his sentiments?"
- "Since yesterday, I believe that I am so. I have no longer any reason to doubt that he truly loves her."
 - "The situation is a little unpleasant.".

"It is very unpleasant," Amory answered; "but it might be far worse than unpleasant. But for him, remember, she might not have been here today. It was Ardashteff who went through fire for her, not St. John.".

Jane smiled.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE sense that the wheel of his fate was about to complete a revolution was stronger than ever upon Amory Wallis when, on the evening of the third day after the fire, he entered the small parlor of the Boston hotel where the family had taken temporary refuge, and found his sister and his wards rather amicably discussing the feasibility of sending to New Hampshire for Hannah Shippen to go and open the house upon the Hudson, and act as housekeeper there during their stay.

Amory was tired, for his business cares were many in these days, and complicated by having to look after the fire insurance on the seaside dwelling. He was content, therefore, to remain for a while a passive listener; and having discovered that this new project also had originated with Constance, he thought he understood the girl's fancy very well, and felt disposed to indulge it. He knew that the tie between the sisters and their mother's latest attendant had remained a strong one, particularly in the case of Constance herself; and if the child thought that in her present strait she could more easily go for comfort and counsel to that plain, stanch, incorruptible old servant than to any of themselves, he was far from sure

that her instinct deceived her. Still he felt bound to warn Jane that Hannah Shippen was of another order than the ordinary household minion, and would require careful handling.

"Oh, I understand that," answered Mrs. Rothery hastily. There had been a revolt among her own most important servitors at the notion of such an exile from the fashionable seaside as was now in question, and it struck her brother, as he observed her, that Jane herself looked older and more nearly worn than he had ever seen her before. "I know all about these people," the practical lady went on. "Didn't I have to do with them myself all my own girlhood? But I judge from what you all tell me that Miss Shippen is an uncommonly able and sensible specimen. She knows the house, and if she can find it consistent with her dignity to go down and open it, and stay with us for a little while, I, for one, shall be very glad."

Amory augured well from the fact that Jane had permitted herself to say Miss Shippen, and promised to write to Hannah that very evening.

A favorable answer came from Wilton, albeit Jane could not help sniffing a little, while Ruth and Amory laughed, at the decidedly condescending terms in which it was couched; and, at the end of a fortnight, the preparations were all complete, and the removal of the family accomplished. They had seen little of Stanton during this interval, but he had frequent journeys to make, and fresh responsibilities upon his hands which he

found sufficiently confusing. Ardashteff, on the other hand, kept faith with Amory, confining his attentions to baskets of superb flowers for "the ladies," and to periodical cards of inquiry; and Amory himself considered that Constance ought to be left to take her own time and method for coming to an explanation with Stanton. He pitied the boy, but hoped, from what he had seen of him, that he might not suffer long or deeply, and it annoyed him a little to think of the talk there would be when all was known, — but he put that reflection away.

Those of the young companions of Constance's gay winter who were still in town, and came to see her, thought her looking wretchedly ill; but the shock she had sustained accounted for that, and the special heroism of Captain Ardashteff was not known. Constance had been in great danger, and she had had to come down by a ladder from the upper story of the burning house. This was all that the world knew.

Amory found himself obliged to remain in town for a short time after the others, but he accompanied the ladies to the train, and at the very last moment found means to ask Constance whether she had written her letter.

"Yes," she answered, trembling, "I wrote last evening. It will go to-day." And Amory pitied her agitation, and loved the tenderness of heart in her, from which he thought it sprang. A letter had indeed been written, and one of a strange

enough purport, but since it was never received, there is no need to repeat its contents here.

Amory had a little office on State Street now, and one afternoon, not many days later, as he sat there, writing busily at a table encumbered with papers, there came a sharp knock at his door, to which he answered, "Come in;" and the next moment he had risen to welcome Captain Ardashteff.

After brief greetings had been exchanged, "I am come," said the Russian simply, "to ask for the exact address of Mrs. Rothery and the young ladies."

"I would rather you did not write, Alexis, until"—

"I shall not write, I shall go. It is useless to remonstrate," the young man went on with more heat. "You asked me to wait, and I have waited."

"It was my ward's own request that time might be allowed her fully to know her own mind."

"I beg your pardon, Major. You had it from me on the morning after the fire that she knew it thoroughly. And now it is a fortnight since, and what she does not yet know is that I may be forced very soon to leave America."

"Then go," said Amory earnestly, "and come back for her when she has been a little while free. She is pitifully young as yet. It will save some talk about her. It will be better in every way." "Aha!" cried Alexis, with a flashing eye, "you thought of that; you counted on my going. You know something of the tyranny of my engagements $l\hat{a}$ bas, and you thought to delay matters until"—

"Make no such accusation, Ardashteff," interrupted Amory with authority, "for you know that it is unjust."

"Well, then, I withdraw it; but see her I will! When I say that I love, I think that you cannot know what I mean. I will not lose her! I will not leave her, even for a time, lest some misfortune should befall."

"If you are bent on forcing matters like this, I should advise you to go at once to St. John."

"I have tried that," Alexis answered promptly.

"I went down again yesterday to that house of his by the sea, but he was absent, had left no address, had named no date for his return. Is it strange that the thought came, 'He is gone to plead again with that blameless child; he will try to persuade her that it would be mortal sin to marry the man she truly loves'?"

"We are all wronged by your suspicions, Ardashteff," Amory answered. "Here is a letter which I had just written to my sister. Deliver it in person, if you will. You will see that I have tried to do my best for the happiness of all."

"Mille remerciments, mon ami, et mille pardons!" and Alexis departed, letter in hand.

Amory longed to follow him, but could not yet

get clear of his engagements, - positively could not, or so he thought, for another day or two. Yet, knowing what he did of Alexis and his methods, he found himself besieged by a keen and ever deepening disquietude as to the possible results of a meeting between him and Stanton; and after rating himself awhile for his anxiety as needless, he ended by sending a telegram to Judge Ford, in which he earnestly invited the old gentleman to pay a visit to their wards in their new quarters at the earliest possible opportunity. Already, by letter, he had given his colleague a hint of probable complications in Constance's love-affairs, but still he had to be more explicit than he liked in the message which he committed to the wires. He was decidedly relieved, however, to find upon his office table the next morning a yellow envelope containing the brief response, "Go to-day. F."; and he proceeded to push forward, as rapidly as possible, his preparations for joining the family party.

Mrs. Rothery and the sisters were still occupied with the dessert of their uncommonly silent dinner, when a caller was announced for the former, and she rose and went into the gaudy drawing-room, with the pre-æsthetic furnishings of which the reader is already acquainted, to receive Captain Ardashteff.

Never had the Russian's manner been more gracefully insinuating than when, after the first exchange of compliments, he drew an envelope from his pocket, and said, as he handed it to Mrs. Rothery, "I bring you a letter from Major Wallis,

madam, and I am come for Miss Constance's sake; and by your leave, and his, I am to see her alone."

Mrs. Rothery believed him so implicitly, and had so plainly perceived, from the tenor of her last conversation with Amory, what the end was likely to be, that she did not even open the letter. "I will fetch Miss Constance myself," she said dryly, and left the room, half gratified by the fulfilment of her own predictions, half disgusted at Amory's pliability and the affront to Stanton, and at all the gossip which she foresaw. In the hall she met Ruth. "That Russian is here," was all she said, "and I am going to summon Constance."

Mrs. Rothery had never quite believed—perhaps because she was incapable of fully comprehending it—in Ruth's exquisite simplicity and sincerity of character; and the notion that there had been no confidence between the girls, that Ruth alone of them all was ignorant still of the true cause of Constance's wayward wretchedness, seemed too preposterous a one to be admitted into Jane's reasonable mind. She fancied that she had given the elder girl an all-sufficient clue to the new turn which affairs had taken, while unsuspicious Ruth, merely deeming that she too was requested to go and receive the guest, instantly bent her steps toward the drawing-room.

Constance had remained at the table, in a quiver of excitement and suspense; and fixing her eager yet apprehensive eyes upon Mrs. Rothery, when she reappeared, she could not restrain a little cry as the latter said, "Captain Ardashteff has come, Constance, and he has come to see you. I suppose this must mean," Jane went on, detaining for one instant the girl's palpitating figure, "that all is already at an end between you and Stanton."

Constance nodded; she could not speak.

"And that your *present* intention" (for her life Jane could not have forborne the emphasis) "is to marry this other man."

A second but fainter gesture of assent was her only answer, and then Mrs. Rothery turned and preceded Constance into the drawing-room.

To the surprise and momentary confusion of both, Ardashteff was not alone.

Ruth and he were standing, side by side, before the vacant fireplace, which was surmounted by a monumental massiveness of hideous white marble.

"Little inanimate things," Alexis was saying, "appear at times to have the gift of immortality." Then he broke off suddenly to inclose in a fervent pressure the small cold hand which Constance held out to him.

"We are speaking of this," Ruth said, indicating a faded photograph which had been set up against one of the bulky mantel-ornaments, and which represented a pair of lovely childish faces framed in a circle of luxuriant foliage. No one spoke for an instant, and Ruth went on, beginning, however, to be keenly conscious of some mystery in the air: "I was saying how strange it was that

this little old likeness of us two should have been saved from the fire, and how it is actually the only one of the pair of us in existence now."

"It is most curious indeed," said Alexis, with snavity; "and it was taken here, at this very place, did you not say?"

Ruth assented. "I would like to see the spot," the young man went on; "it must be a charming one. Miss Constance, will you not show it me?"

Silently and swiftly the two passed out together, while Ruth turned to Mrs. Rothery. "What does it all mean?" she cried in amazement.

"Do you not really guess? It means," was the succinct answer, "that your experienced sister is now under the impression that she would rather marry this foreigner than Stanton St. John."

The old, wild garden, long neglected even when we saw it first, had gone back many degrees toward a state of nature in the seven intervening years; and there had not been time as yet, since the arrival of the family, so much as to clear the thick tangle of encumbering vines and brambles from the ancient gravel walks. But how infinitely had the native luxuriance of the spacious highwalled precinct been enriched even by the crude art which had aforetime passed that way! On this, the first hot evening of the all-bounteous and triumphant June, the well-nigh pathless wilderness of trees, shrubs, and unmown grasses was full of color and odor, while it resounded with the exultant singing of innumerable birds. Rose-bushes of

all kinds ran riot there; and roses of every hue,
— pink, yellow, white and crimson — were unfolding on all hands. It was their perfect moment.

Many were still in the bud; not a petal had yet fallen. The light feet of Constance disdained the tangling briers, as she led the way. She could not even wait for Alexis to tear them asunder for her with his hands.

On the Hudson steamer, half an hour later, two men discovered one another's presence unexpectedly, and fell to exchanging friendly greetings.

"Why, Judge," exclaimed the younger, "have you been here all the time? Where have you kept yourself? Why did n't I see you before?"

"Stanton!" returned the elder man, with at least equal surprise. "Are you going up the river too? You preferred to see her at once, then—You thought"—

"Why, yes," admitted Stanton. "It's natural—ain't it, sir?—that my preferences should lie that way. I found I could get away for a night, and I thought I'd just drop down upon Connie, and see how she's getting on,—give her a surprise, you know."

"So then he has heard nothing," thought the judge; and he felt his heart swell with compassion for the son of his old friend's adoption, and with something like wrath at the selfish coquetry of his light-hearted lady-love. "My boy," he said gravely, "I believe I ought to give you a little warning.

Has it never occurred to you that you might possibly not be welcome?"

"Why — no," was the bewildered answer. "Things are in some confusion yet up yonder, of course, but it's an awfully big house, is n't it? Oh, I say, sir, what do you mean? Is there anything else that I have n't been told? Is she ill again?"

"Not at all, so far as I know; but, Stanton, she is very young. You and she were both very young last year. Maybe you got your way too easily. Your dear grandsire would have made an offer for the moon if you had wanted it, my boy, and a handsome one too. Have you noticed no change in Constance? Have you never thought—especially since that Russian came"—

Stanton's broad face flushed, but he answered with almost dogged emphasis, "No, sir, I have n't, and I don't! In fact, I know better."

Judge Ford shook his head and murmured, half unconsciously, the *mutabile semper*, which conveyed no meaning to college-bred Stanton. "I dislike to shake your confidence," he began again.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Stanton interrupted; "but you can't do it. I know there's no danger in that quarter, and if I could tell you the whole story, you would know it too."

The boat swung round to the landing. A little pony-trap had been sent down to meet the expected guest; but it had room for only one passenger, and Judge Ford, half inclined to be

reassured by Stanton's invincible security, and remembering the ins and outs of the premises quite well, indicated to the latter the zigzag path up the steep, embowered bank of the river, — the same that Amory had followed long before, and which led to the postern-gate in the garden wall. "I'll tell them you are on the way," the lawyer said, "and if the door is locked, they will come and undo it."

"Thanks," murmured Stanton, and set off with great strides.

The sun had gone down into a dense cloud, after all the splendor of the day. The air was very sultry now, and there were ominous mutterings along the west. Something in the breathless quiet of the hour, a stillness broken only by a few agitated chirpings from invisible nests near by, struck an unaccustomed sense of awe to the heart of headlong, unobservant Stanton. He paused before the postern to recover breath, and as he did so, a young voice, only too well known, said, close at hand, but in such accents as it had never had for him,—

"Oh, take me with you when you go! I am not afraid of danger, or of death; but live here—without you—I cannot—I will not!"

Stanton threw his heavy weight upon the little wooden door, and its rusty hinges gave way. As the grating sound fell on her ear, Constance sprang away from Ardashteff; but his arm was still about her waist as they turned and faced the intruder together.

"Why are you here?" cried the girl, sharply; and her tones expressed petulance and disgust far more than terror.

"It seems to me that I came none too soon," he began heavily; then, as the whole aspect of the situation came slowly home to him, "Oh, my God!" he said in a hoarse voice; "what's going to become of us all?"

His manner impressed even Ardashteff. Stanton seemed to the Russian a boy no longer. "Shall we speak together, Mr. St. John," he asked significantly, — "you and I?"

"No, no!" shrieked Constance, in an agony of alarm. "Go away, — you, Alexis! — if you love me, and leave us here!"

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, then bowed his obedience, turned, and disappeared in the dusky shrubbery. The two waited motionless until the rustle of his going had ceased, and some one was heard greeting him at the back of the house. Then Stanton spoke.

"Constance, you are my wife!"

"No, no!" she cried. "I won't hear it! How dared you come, — after my letter, too?"

"I have had no letter," he went on, in the same dull yet weighty fashion; "but what of that? What could you have written that would have made any difference?"

"I told you I hated you, and loved him, and that I was not so much of a child but that I knew our marriage was no real one at all."

But Stanton was to be fooled no longer. She felt herself beginning to tremble before him, as he answered steadily, "And you thought that I would stand by and see such a thing as that?"

"Why not? You cannot want me, I should think, when I have told you how I feel?"

"No," he answered hoarsely; "you are right there: I do not want you now, but I will save you. What has wanting to do with right and wrong? You and I are married."

"Prove it!" she cried. "It was never registered. The man is dead. I have burned the certificate, and I'll deny it all."

"And still," he answered, simply and steadily, "they will believe me."

"Oh, let me go! Don't keep me bound against my will! It's unmanly! What harm can it do to anybody, if I go?"

"Is it possible," he began, "that you do not understand?"—

"I understand perfectly; and I do not care. I tell you that I love him."

Again they faced one another in silence, and again Stanton was the first to speak.

"You must never say another word like that again. You've degraded yourself already; but I'll keep you from falling any lower. And I'll make it as easy for you as I can," he added, with a break in his honest tones. "But oh, to think that it has come to this between you and me!" There was a sound in Stanton's throat like a sob; but he

collected himself, and went on. "You must tell him to-morrow morning — in my presence — how it is. Then I will tell the judge and the rest of them, and we'll go through the form of being married as soon as possible; and in future I'll look after you."

"I refuse!"

"No, you will do it — when you've thought it over. And now go into the house, to your own room, and I'll excuse you to the others."

"But I tell you that I have promised to ride

with Alexis to-morrow morning."

"Then I shall go along, and we'll have our explanation out-of-doors somewhere, away from the house. Perhaps it will be better. Now go, I tell you, for there's a big storm coming up, and it rains already."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RAIN burst out of the blackened heavens in a torrent, and Constance's light summer gown was drenched before she gained the house. But she was one whose thoughts come quickly at crises, and she had presence of mind enough to send to the drawing-room, by the first servant whom she met in the hall, an excuse for herself on the score of her wet garments, and an announcement of Mr. St. John's arrival, which last, however, the judge had forestalled.

So unexpected and so embarrassing was the young man's advent at that moment that it had required all the address of Ardashteff to keep conversation going in the drawing-room; but, strangely enough, the entrance of Stanton himself seemed to make matters easier. He paid his respects quite simply to the two ladies, and apologized for having come unannounced. He was very grave, and his few remarks were of necessity commonplace, but in his manner there was a sort of weighty calm. Stanton, the hobbledehoy, the feckless, trivial, and maladroit, seemed transformed into a plain, sober, undeniably dignified man. He was distant but irreproachably civil to the Russian, and to Judge Ford he was rather touchingly deferential. They

never, any of them, forgot the new light in which he appeared that evening. Even his grandfather, thought those who had known the elder St. John, might have been satisfied with his bearing.

"Come in and talk it all out with me," the judge found means to say to Stanton, in the passage

which led to their respective bedrooms.

"Thank you, sir; not to-night. To-morrow, if you please, I'd like an hour with you. You don't go back early?"

"Not before noon. Good-night, my boy, and God bless you!"

All that night, for the first time in his healthy and heedless young life, Stanton kept vigil. The clouds returned after the first heavy rain; the thunder was growling for hours, now nearer and now more remote; and blinding flashes out of the accumulated clouds lit up, at intervals, the maze of dripping verdure in the neglected garden which the windows of Stanton's bedroom commanded.

There was no anger in the young man's thoughts, only one stout resolve, monotonously repeated,—"I'll save her!" He even reflected, in his deep humility, that the fault had been principally his own. Ardashteff was a foreigner. That accounted sufficiently to the simple mind of Stanton for his part in the drama; and really, when one came to think of it, how could any girl, romantic and impulsive Constance least of all, have helped preferring that superb young fellow to himself? "She's too young to understand her

own position; but I understand it well enough, and I ought to have prevented this. I had sworn to protect her, and then I just let the whole matter slide. Worse yet, I deceived everybody. I've been living a lie for more than a year — at college and at home. The first thing that grandfather found out about me there must have been that I had deceived him. It's all right," was the summing-up of his honest self-judgment, — "all right, so far as I am concerned. I deserve it; and it will be much harder for her than for me. But — I will be good to her."

The storms were over now, and the early dawn was white in the east. Stanton flung himself full dressed upon his bed, and slept for an hour or two, then rose in the clear sunrise of the most glorious of summer mornings to find the birds vociferously glad outside his open window, and the rain-drenched roses in the wilderness below everywhere lifting their bowed heads, and exhaling their spiciest odor.

To Constance the short summer night had been no less eventful. As she mounted the stairs in her wet white gown, after parting from Stanton, her eye was caught by the light that shone through an open door on the third story of the old mansion. She paused for a moment, then, embracing a sudden resolution, sprang up the second flight, and entered a small room where Hannah Shippen sat sewing by the light of a petroleum lamp.

The woman looked up over her spectacles and

cried out in amazement, "Sakes alive, Constance Curwen, is that you? I thought there was company down-stairs. What ails you? Why, your gown's wet through! Child, what is it?"

Constance advanced a few steps, then stopped and clenched her hands. "It is this, Shippie," she replied vehemently, "that I wish I were dead."

Hannah regarded the girl keenly for an instant, then rose, closed the door which Constance had left open, and returned to her seat. Once she opened her firm lips as if to speak, then paused again, to remove and fold up her spectacles, before she made the brief remark, "That's nonsense."

"Ah, Shippie, you don't know."

"I rather think I do, though. Between Ruth and Major Wallis, with their highfalutin notions, and Mrs. Rothery, who thinks that she's queenregent of the whole concern, you've been made to believe that it's a terrible crime to break an engagement. Well, now, I undertake to tell you that it ain't no such thing. It's a great pity, of course, and it will be hard for you, and harder still for the poor boy you fancied that you loved, before ever you'd seen a man. But you and he - Mr. St. John, I mean — are less to blame about it all than anybody else is, to my thinking. Whatever these precious wiseacres were dreaming of when they allowed you to be engaged to be married as soon as ever you'd begun to turn up your hair, passes me, and it always did. I just caught a glimpse of the

other one to-night, and I can see that he's the sort to take a girl's heart out of her. What I say is, they ought all to be thankful that you've found out your mistake in time. I've always thought," pursued the spinster meditatively, "that the very awfullest thing about marrying would be the chance that as soon as you was fast bound to one man, — when you'd married him to get rid of him, perhaps, as so many do, — you might see another whom you liked ever so much better. And then there'd be no help for you."

Constance had been listening with parted lips. At the last words, she thrust out her hands against her old confidante with a sharp cry of reproach,—"You too, Shippie, you too! I always thought you loved me"—and she was rushing away.

"What is it, then?" said the astute woman, attempting to detain her. "Is there more than I know?" But Constance wrenched herself from the strong though not unkindly grasp, and fled down-stairs like some hunted animal, leaving Hannah aghast, and capable only of sending after her a mechanical command to take off her wet frock without another moment's delay.

She did so, and had been sitting in her wrapper she knew not how long, thinking wrathfully of Stanton, and adoringly of Alexis, trying hard not to unnerve herself by forecasting the scene of the morrow, when Ruth entered the chamber and came and stood beside her with unspeakable pity and pleading in her lucent eyes.

"Oh, my Connie," she said, "do not shut me out of your heart. I know you are in such trouble: tell me all about it, as if we were children again. You used to say that it helped you."

"In those days, Ruthie, you loved me best."

"But never so dearly as now! Try me, sister, and see."

Constance fancied herself resisting still, when suddenly, without warning, the longing to speak overcame her. "If I tell you, will you promise me — solemnly — never to own that you knew it until all the world is told?"

Ruth hesitated.

"It is something," Constance went on, trying to choose her words warily, "about which I cannot make up my mind. But I would rather it were never known, afterwards, that I had hesitated. Tomorrow it will all be decided."

Ruth felt relieved. She leaped to the natural conclusion that Constance was merely doubting still between her two suitors. "I think I may promise," she said.

"And you do?"

"Yes, I do. I know more about it, Connie, than you think. It is painful, but it does not seem to me unnatural you have found out — so late — that it is Captain Ardashteff whom you love."

"Love?" Constance uttered the word as though she scorned its feebleness. "But that is not all. Listen, and let me tell you now, — let me tell you quickly, or I shall never tell at all. Think back yourself, Ruthie, to the time when I was engaged — last year. I came home from New Hampshire, and you went away. I hardly saw you at all "—

"Because Mrs. Rothery was afraid of the fever."

"Oh, that woman!" exclaimed Constance, fiercely. "It was all her fault. She sent you away. She talked to Miss Ingestre about marrying you to Stanton till she provoked us two into calling ourselves engaged; and then — then — she scolded and threatened until she drove us to something else. Ruth, we were married."

"Oh, no,—do not say it!" But the younger sister had flung herself upon the shoulder of the elder, and her only answer was a passion of sobs. Gently Ruth drew her down upon the couch beside herself, and caressed her in an agony of compassion and self-reproach. "Oh, my poor, poor Connie! Oh, how could I have been so blind?"

Presently, however, Constance disengaged herself from Ruth's embrace, sat upright, and went on spasmodically: "It was the next night: I got out by the window — that window. Stanton bribed the justice of the peace with ever so much money. I suppose he must have been a bad man, but he's dead now, so that does n't matter. Then everybody agreed to our engagement, and we thought we had merely been silly, and promised one another that we would forget it all. And now he won't."

The look of horror in Ruth's face showed Constance that she had gone too far; but she hurried

on defiantly. "He declares that he will go out riding with us to-morrow, and that I must tell Alexis how it is, and that he will tell the rest. And if I do not, he will go straight to Judge Ford."

"What else can he do?" said Ruth brokenly. "Oh, Connie, you do not hesitate"—

"Not hesitate about going to the man I worship—yes, worship—and killing his love for me at one blow? You might do it, perhaps. Alexis said once that you were in love with self-sacrifice, but I cannot—and I will not!"

"Hush, Constance!" Ruth spoke in a tone of solemn authority. "Your words are too dreadful. Oh, I know you do not mean them!"

But Constance drew away from her with a harsh laugh. "I like your sisterly sympathy," she said. "It's very consoling. When guardian comes tomorrow, you'll have a great story to tell him!" and violently flinging off the other's beseeching hand, she fled from Ruth also, as she had fled from Hannah, and the door closed sharply behind her.

At nine o'clock the next morning, Ruth was prostrate, paralyzed, and almost blinded by a violent attack of sick headache to which she had been frequently subject in her delicate girlhood, but which she seemed of late entirely to have outgrown. As she lay, half dazed with pain, the sound of trampling hoofs was audible outside. "Are they gone?" Ruth whispered to Hannah Shippen, who was waiting on her.

Hannah stole to the window and peeped through the closed blinds. "All three of 'em," she answered, adding half unconsciously, "and I wonder what sort of a ride they 'll have."

The heavy showers of the night before had lent a wondrous brilliancy and freshness to the out-of-door scene, and Constance, in spite of the strain upon her nerves, was conscious of receiving from the beauty of the morn a distinct sense of physical exhibitation.

The three equestrians passed out of the avenue abreast. The sang-froid of Ardashteff was admirable, and he betrayed no surprise at the addition of Stanton to the party. They trotted for ten minutes or so along the beautiful river road, in almost unbroken silence. At this point they reached the entrance to some very extensive private grounds, which contained several miles of shaded bridle-paths. The lavish owner of this estate made all his neighbors welcome to the rides through his luxuriant woods; and Constance waved her light riding-whip when they came to the open gateway, to indicate that they would take that route. No sooner were they within the entrance, however, than they were confronted by a workman, who said, without the preliminary salute that Alexis would have demanded, yet respectfully enough, "Ask your pardon, gentlemen. I just wanted to tell you to keep to the right when you come to the fork in the bridle-road, about half a mile ahead. The bridge over the ravine went

down in the rain last night. Bank caved in. I hain't thought it too safe for horses myself this good while, and I'm glad it's gone."

"Is the other road all right?" asked Stanton.

"Oh, yes! A little washed, maybe, but safe enough. No bridges that way. Good day to you!" and the man passed on.

But before they had had time to gather up their reins after the enforced halt, Stanton interposed: "Let's wait here a minute. Constance," he said bluntly, turning his face full upon the Russian, "has something to say to you, Captain Ardashteff."

Alexis lifted his pencilled eyebrows, but the young girl, thus driven to bay, after a piercing look from the one man to the other, threw her head up suddenly, and gave a sharp cut of the whip to the spirited animal she rode, who sprang forward excitedly, and bore her swiftly away!

Both her lovers were after her in an instant, but she had the start of them. They saw her strike her horse again when she came to the parting of the ways, and turn into the left-hand road.

Stanton's faculties were not quick enough to show him the full significance of her mad act. He only felt vaguely, "She wants to get off with the Russian."

But Alexis remembered the night of the fire, and the conviction went through him like an arrow, in the condensed words of his native tongue, "She will ride into the ravine! She will die for the love of me!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

RUTH was better, and seemed likely to fall asleep; and Hannah Shippen stole on tip-toe out of her chamber. On the landing of the main stairway she encountered Mrs. Rothery, and perceived at a glance that even that self-contained lady was feeling restless and anxious concerning the singular interview so evidently prearranged between the three riders.

"If you've nothing in particular for me to do, I guess I'll go and set the parlor to rights," observed Hannah in her off-hand fashion, and the mistress of the mansion assented.

But when, armed with her duster, Miss Shippen entered the drawing-room, she found it occupied by Judge Ford, who had established himself in an arm-chair beside one of the long windows, and was making a pretense — Hannah perceived that it was only a pretense — of reading a newspaper. He, too, looked worried and constrained.

"Shall I disturb you if I dust a little, sir?" she said. The judge was one of the few mortals who commanded Hannah's unqualified respect.

"Not at all, not at all," he answered rather eagerly. "Why, Miss Shippen," he added, letting fall his impracticable journal, "you were in my

thoughts this very moment. Do you remember a talk we once had in this room, you and I, about the little girls — as they were then — and my good friend, Major Wallis?"

Hannah Shippen compressed in one hand the feathers of her big duster, and rested the handle of it upon a table, somewhat in the supposed attitude of Athena promachos. The white cloth which she had twisted about her smooth hair, to protect it from the flying dust, enhanced the grotesque resemblance.

"If I was n't," she said impressively, "a-thinking of that selfsame thing!"

"Well, well," the old man went on, "how the years do fly, to be sure! The time seems long to those young things, no doubt; but to me it might have happened yesterday! I can see them as plainly as they were then, a pair of slim little maidens in black, and now they are two beautiful women"—

"Oh, yes, they're handsome enough," Hannah admitted. "I always supposed they would be. Their mother before 'em was that."

"And Ruth, — Miss Curwen; Mrs. Wallis that will be, —she's as lovely in character as in person."

"Ruth's a good girl, Judge," Miss Shippen said moderately, "and wants to do what's right. She's full of her fancies, — pious ones they may be; I don't say nothing against 'em, — and Major Wallis, he understands her. He's sort o' sentimental

himself, you know, at bottom; and I suppose that's why I was kind o' shocked when I first heard he was a-goin' to marry her. But it's the other—it's Connie—that was always my girl. And now"—

The judge nodded slowly, with a sombre brow. "Her affairs are in a good deal of a tangle, I'm afraid," he began.

"They be," Hannah answered, bringing the handle of her brush down sharply upon the marble table; "and whose fault is it? No offense to you, sir; but to my thinking, them are to blame, and them only, who hurried up her engagement to a rich young fellow, with no particular brains, long before the child herself could have known her own mind."

"You are hard on her guardians, Miss Shippen," said the judge; "too hard, I think. It was a mistake, I suppose, but we thought we were gratifying the young people themselves, and mercenary considerations—upon my honor!—had as little to do with it as is possible in such a case."

"Very likely," Hannah replied with a sharpness born, as her interlocutor well knew, of her own overmastering anxiety, and giving an involuntary look down the straight, shady avenue which led from the high-road to the house. "As far as her real bony-fidy guardians are concerned, I believe you. But she's always been under a pressure. They both have. And she's got wild blood in her veins. I knew her mother, Judge; and what's more, I knew her father. He was a brute, but he

had his grievance, too, — a big one. I could ha' told, if anybody 'd asked me, that Connie might go foolin' round with this young fellow and that, just as she did with the boys up to my place last summer; but that whenever a regular splendid hero like this foreigner came along, she 'd just fling him her whole soul."

The old man sighed, and slightly shook his head. "He will have her, no doubt," he said. "She is off with poor Stanton already, I suppose, or will be to-day; but I wish, oh, I wish, that we could trust him as implicitly as I, for one, could have trusted that plain, simple, blundering young fellow whom she has thrown over!"

"Just so, sir," said the good woman, distressfully. "What do we know of them Rooshians after all? - a lot of pagans with their daggers, and their moustaches, and their devil-may-care ways. But still, water's water, and he saved her from the fire. I'll tell you, Judge," she added, after one more look down the avenue, "just how it all seems to me. Here have you all been to work for seven years upon these two girls, tryin' to make 'em something different from what God made 'em in the beginning. They've been taught and trained, and pushed and checked, and cultivated, and no expense spared, as there was no need, of course; and they've been shown to the world, and the world's been shown to them! And what does it all amount to? I know just as well how it is with 'em to-day as I did the day when you saw 'em first.

They just divide their mother between 'em; and Ruth has got her piety, and Constance has got her passion, with something else thrown in from the other side of the house which none of us understands too well."

"Are you in her confidence?" the judge asked quickly.

"If I was," Hannah retorted, "I should hold my tongue; but I ain't, and that's what worries me. I can't get anything out of her. I don't know what I'm afraid of, but I wish this day was over — There's Major Wallis now!"

The form for which Hannah seemed to have been looking had appeared upon the avenue, accompanied by another, that of a laborer living in the neighborhood. Something in the haste of both, and their expression as they drew near, held the two at the windows speechless and breathless.

"What has happened, Major?" the judge contrived to ask, when his colleague had stepped upon the veranda and revealed an ashen face.

"A terrible accident! Who went out riding from this house this morning?"

"Constance and Stanton and the Russian."

Amory groaned. "What's happened to her?" cried Hannah, but he only shook his head slightly, and the man at his side answered for him, "The young lady's quite safe, ma'am. I see it all. It was there at the gully, where the bridge went down last night. The Lord knows why they were there! Jim Steel says he warned 'em, but I suppose the

young girl did n't understand. Anyhow, she rid straight to the brink, and they after her; and the foreigner — that 's a brave fellow! — he got hold of her bridle, and forced her horse back alongside his own; but the other, the stout one, — he was clumsier, — the ground give way under his horse's feet, perhaps, — he — went over!"

"Is he dead?" inquired Judge Ford, in a trembling voice.

"That is the only comfort!" Amory answered.
"His head struck a rock, they say; and it must have been instantaneous. I'm going there now."

"Will you take me with you?" Hannah asked, "to look after Connie?"

"Perhaps that will be best; but Ruth must be told, and my sister. Oh, why did the poor boy come here last night?"

The nearest dwelling to the scene of the disaster was a cottage occupied by one of the gardeners on the estate. It was a lonely place, but a good many people had already gathered in and about it. Hannah found Constance there, in a close little bedroom at the back of the house, lying supine with half-closed eyes, and only at intervals making a slight convulsive movement. She took no notice of her old nurse's entrance; and the woman of the house told Hannah that she did not think the poor young lady more than half sensed the whole thing. Hannah, when she had watched her for a time, thought differently. The ears of Constance, she felt certain, were strained to catch some sound, and

when, at last, the voice of Ardashteff was heard outside, giving in his clear, quiet English a few directions to the men, the tension of the girl's nerves was visibly relaxed, and a single tear stole down her colorless cheek.

Preparations were hurriedly making now to receive in the front room of the cottage a yet more silent guest, and Constance appeared all at once to become aware of what was doing.

"Here, Shippie?" she whispered, opening her dark eyes wide with horror. "Are they bringing him here? Oh, take me away, quick, before they come! I cannot be here with him!"

Hannah stepped outside, and consulted a moment with Major Wallis. They agreed that it would be better for Constance to go at once. A vehicle was borrowed from one of the doctors already present in force; and Hannah held and soothed the trembling creature as best she might, until she was laid upon a bed at home. Some one had excitedly opened for them, as they came up the stairs, the door of the great chamber where Mrs. Curwen died; but Constance had shaken her head feebly and Hannah had hurried her by.

The first person whom Amory encountered on his return some hours later was Judge Ford. The old man was greatly shaken; but the few questions which he addressed to his friend were put with all his wonted perspicacity.

"He'll have to lie there till to-morrow," said the lawyer, "and then — did you think of having him brought here?"

"I had not thought so far."

"Well, then, don't! not into the house with those two. Let everything be done decently and in order, — and the folks over yonder richly paid, — and then we'll take the poor fellow down the river, you and I, and lay him in Greenwood beside his grandfather."

"I believe you are quite right, Judge. And now — I have to speak with Captain Ardashteff. We have not yet exchanged a word."

"At your service, Major," said a firm voice behind him; and Amory turned to meet the flashing eyes of the Russian fixed upon him with a look that was not so much defiant as haughtily, almost

scornfully open.

Judge Ford turned abruptly away, and left the two younger men regarding one another. Amory's right hand moved involuntarily, but he did not extend it. All that he had known of the wildest passages in the life of his friend rushed over his mind at that moment, accompanied by a sense of something, forever unfathomable by himself, in the springs of Ardashteff's alien being. Alexis, on his part, had detected the abortive movement, and held his own arms rigid.

"I have waited to hear from your own lips," Amory said at last, "the true story of this awful disaster."

"And I have but waited to tell. I came here yesterday — with your knowledge and consent. I understood from you, I heard afterwards from her-

self, that the poor lad yonder had at last been undeceived. Why he, too, came here last night, God knows! We will not speak of his gaucherie now. He finds us together. He is enragé. She tells me to leave them alone. I thought, for just one moment," Alexis added, mastering his rising excitement and recovering his English by the same effort, "that she feared him; I did her wrong." (His pale face flushed with enthusiasm.) "She does not know fear. I had promised to ride with her this morning. He would absolutely come with us, and we could not hinder. It is quite true that the peasant warned us of the fallen bridge. Then we all stood still; and he"-Alexis crossed himself quite unconsciously — "he began some threat. It was she who struck her horse and rode straight for the chasm."

Amory shuddered. The other went on in the same concise, almost cutting fashion: "I do not know what he thought: we shall never know. But I understood. I tell you now what I did not tell you before: she said to me that night in the burning house that she had gone back — exprès — to escape him because she loved me. That was the trait that made me hers forever. She is young; she is beautiful; if she be rich, I do not care; but in her daring she is intime. She is like the women of my own race. Her place is not here. We came to the brink together. It was mine to save her, and his to fall. He could not ride, poor soul! But she is doubly mine now, and I take her with me when I go, and I go soon."

Amory sighed deeply, and slowly extended his hand; but Ardashteff did not immediately respond to the gesture. "I think," he said, "that you are not yet satisfied."

"How can I be quite satisfied thus to surrender my trust? Constance is my ward, you know. How can I give her to you so young — in such terrible haste — over an open grave? How can I send her away to the life of intrigue and of danger into which she will plunge with you?"

"Her place is there," said Alexis more quietly. "I have read her better than you. And whether

you send her or not, mon ami, she will go."

"So be it, then! and I thank you for telling me all." The two hands met at last, but neither of the men knew all, as the reader understands; and one, at least, was destined never to know.

All that day through, Constance lay in what seemed a half stupor; and Ruth, with the burden of the secret she had learned so lately, and Hannah Shippen with her unspoken dread, took turns in watching over her. The medical orders were to make no attempt to rouse her; but when the girl's apathy had lasted nearly twenty-four hours, all began to apprehend a fresh danger, and to long to see her quiet broken.

The occasion came with the arrival of the morning mail, which brought a pile of letters re-addressed by some servant at the seaside to Stanton St. John. Among them was one in Constance's own handwriting, which seemed to shed a flood of

light over what was still mysterious in the occasion of the tragedy.

Amory turned the letter over sorrowfully, and then gave it to Ruth. "I think, dearest," he said, "that you had better carry it directly to her. It is time that she were moved by something."

Ruth obeyed, first kissing her sister's forehead tenderly, and then placing the letter in her hands without a word.

Constance took it listlessly, turning paler than ever, Ruth thought, at the first moment. But when, having feebly reversed the letter and found the seal unbroken, she perceived that no eyes but her own had ever seen the contents of that envelope, she gave what sounded like a cry of unspeakable relief, burst into a flood of natural tears, and flung her arms around her sister's neck. Ruthie, dearest," she sobbed, "how good you are!" Then, when her emotion had been somewhat soothed by the other's caresses, "O dearest love, I know I've been bad to you, but could I bear the thought that Alexis would ever see this?" She tore the letter asunder as she spoke, with a strength that seemed incredible in hands which had lain so nerveless only a moment before. "Oh, now," she said, "all will be well! Now I seem to know that even Stanton himself has forgiven me. 'Greater love hath no man' - Perhaps, Ruthie, Stanton really loved me best. Perhaps he is happier already than we shall ever be, Alexis and I. But O Ruth! he will have all that I can give him!"

Shocked, bewildered, and not a little frightened by the fervor of this outburst, Ruth's first thought was of calming her sister's excitement. She laid her hand gently on the two which were already rending the letter crosswise, but Constance flung it away. "To think," she exclaimed, with an exultation from which the other shrank, "that Alexis will never know! I cannot believe it even now!"

"Then Captain Ardashteff has not yet been told?" began Ruth slowly.

"Oh, no, and I am so thankful! Why will you not understand? This is the letter that I wrote to poor Stanton. I was afraid that it would come back, and that guardian or the judge might open it; and then he would have known, and every one. But now you have brought it to me, dear Ruth, — you are my good angel always!— and all is safe."

"Do you mean, Constance, that you would marry Captain Ardashteff — oh, how can you ever think of it now? — without telling him — without telling him "— Ruth hesitated, then added, almost in a whisper, — "that you are a widow?"

"I am not! I will not hear it! There was only a ceremony—and perhaps that was not legal"—

"But, Connie, he ought to know."

"No, no!" the girl cried wildly. "Even Stanton would n't ask it now. And Alexis"—

"But right is right. Oh, sister, if you will not tell him"—

"Do you mean, Ruth Curwen, that you would break your promise to me last night?"

Ruth locked her hands convulsively together. "Oh, I do not know," she moaned, "I do not know!"

"This, then, is the end of sisterly faith. You wring my secret out of me, and then — Oh, may I be delivered," Constance went on with intense bitterness, "from such a conscience as yours! As for your promise, I might have known that it was worthless. A girl who can break a vow to Heaven — oh, Miss Ingestre told me all about it! — what would she care for her word to her sister?"

With a stifled moan, Ruth dropped upon her knees, and buried her face from sight. She remained thus for a few minutes, only her lips moving noiselessly. Then she rose, with a changed face, but very calm. "I have deserved this, Connie," she said steadily; "but do not reproach me any more. I have thought and prayed, and I will keep your secret."

CHAPTER XXX.

ONLY a few weeks elapsed between the catastrophe of that June morning and the marriage and departure of Constance, whose restoration to bodily health was rapid from the hour when she received her sister's promise, and who lavished upon Ruth during their last days together every mark of her fondest affection. They were strange weeks, and would have been exceedingly sad if they had been less fully occupied; but they passed with a dreamlike swiftness. A plainer and more joyless wedding could scarcely be imagined: the ceremony was in fact witnessed by five people only, the two guardians of the bride and her sister, Mrs. Rothery and Hannah Shippen. Within an hour thereafter the good-byes had been spoken, and the sisterly arms untwined.

That Ruth should have been deeply affected by what had passed, and by the severance from her other self, seemed natural to all who knew her. Only one person was conscious of a change in her, inexplicable even by these grave events,—a change which, while enhancing her sweetness, if possible, by the touch of something wistful and compassionate, seemed to her guardian and her lover to be removing her ever farther and farther from himself.

He would be her guardian but a few months longer now, for Ruth came of age in December, and he tried by fits and starts to think that this was the reason why she had returned to her old fashion of addressing him, and called him Amory no longer. But in his heart he knew better. Though never so tender in the language of her eyes, Ruth had ceased altogether from the delicate and shy caresses which she had learned to proffer to her future husband; and he thought that she sometimes received those which he lavished upon her with such a look as was only too familiar to his memory, - the look of dark orbs uplifted, to catch, through the fast-engulfing mists of dissolution, the face which has been dearest bending downwards for a final kiss. At other times, however, Amory was half reassured by the deep serenity of his lady. Certainly there were few evidences about Ruth in these days of habitual mental suffering. She seemed to have grown indefinitely older and more self-poised. She withdrew herself as little as possible from the now sadly narrowed family circle, and Amory saw, with a pleasure that cut sharper than pain, how surely the remnant of his sister's inveterate prejudice was melting away under the influence of that gentle tact of his bride that was not to be.

The sultry weather of August was over, the annual drought broken, and the beautiful days of early autumn came around again, bringing the anniversary of their first strange meeting and of their brief betrothal. One day at about this time,

Mrs. Rothery had a long letter from Estelle Ingestre, who had not kept her promise of returning at the end of the summer, and over whose latest movements a certain mystery had seemed to hang. She began by saying that she had feared to miss the Ardashteffs altogether, but by the greatest good fortune had encountered them in the Tyrol; and then she expatiated with all her adjectives on the extremely distinguished appearance of the pair, their devotion to one another, and the admiration everywhere accorded to Constance.

"The little puss!" Estelle went on. "She takes it all in the coolest fashion, — quite as her right; and so it is. Oh the aplomb of these American girls! They all behave as though they fancied themselves born of kings; and for the matter of that, I have seen more than one princess, with a name a yard long, who could n't hold the least bit of a candle to either of the Curwens. Well, I am truly thankful that they have both met their fate, — a woman's only happy fate! — so early. Captain Ardashteff, I am convinced, is as truly Constance's counterpart as Amory is our sweet Ruth's, and as — But I anticipate.

"They do say that he can never take her to Russia, because he is suspected of being mixed up in no end of political conspiracies, but I dare say there's no truth in this. He will be her lord and — I was going to say master, but that word will always look a little offensive, so I substitute 'protector.' He will protect her, I say, in a sense

in which poor Stanton never could. What is needed by every woman, old and young, - by the old, I maintain, even more than by the young, is a protector; and I fancy, dear Jane, that you will feel only a momentary surprise when I confess to you that, after so many days, I have found my own. Oh, yes, when I arrived at Ventnor, weak and miserable, as you know, my faithful old friend, Horatio Forney, was waiting to receive me, and surrounded me with the most assiduous cares. He restored me to health both of body and of soul. He led me back to the simple faith of my childhood, — from which I had receded so far. and then he offered me his heart and hand. Our fortunes are now united." (Jane lifted her eyebrows a little at this point, and Amory, to whom she was reading the letter aloud, gave the slightest possible shrug.) "Our home will be here, and my work among Horatio's people. I end my days, after all, as the wife of a dissenting parson. Droll, is it not? But I am so happy! Wish me joy, my dear Jane, and tell Amory and Ruth. I feel sure of the sympathy of the former, and if my beloved girl regrets for a moment that our opinions should once more diverge, why, who knows what miracles love may yet work with even her!"

Mrs. Rothery folded up the letter, and exchanged a smile with her auditor, sarcastic on her own part, kindly upon his, but they said not a word. It occurred to Amory at that moment that, for years and years of his life, some such involuntary and

silent witness to the entire mutual comprehension of people of the same blood, who live long together, had represented the uttermost which he expected to receive of human sympathy; and he had a distinct presentiment that there were other years in store for him in which he would have no more.

The autumn weeks went by, and Judge Ford was almost their only visitor. So long as he could come to them by the river, he seemed to enjoy the change, but he was noticeably weaker than the year before.

Then the Indian Summer came, and protracted itself far into December, until Ruth's twenty-first birthday was passed, and the formalities accomplished which put her in possession of her own fortune. They were going to Boston with the New Year, but had promised to pass their Christmas with Judge Ford. The day of the first snowfall was ending in a pale and curiously noiseless twilight: the air was mild, every flake lay where it had fallen; the rolling land, the trees along the avenue, the vines about the veranda, were muffled in spotless white. The sky itself looked dark and impenetrable beside the earth's incredible purity. Then Ruth, in her gown of soft white woollen, came gliding up to Amory, where he sat by the fallen coals of a generous fire, and dropped upon her knees beside him.

The moment had come which he had foreboded; the long dreaded word was lovingly, humbly, almost penitently spoken. "Dear Guardian — Oh, my dearest! — it is terrible to give you a blow; but you know what I have come to say, do you not? The other vow, — the promise to God, if he would save your dear life, — that was binding. And He has surely been merciful to us both in showing me the truth clearly before — Ah, you did know it, did you not? that we can never be married, — that I must soon go away? I thought He had been making you ready" —

Amory had thought so, too, and yet the blow was terrible. He struggled for one futile moment against his own foregone resignation, forcing himself to consider that, perhaps, it might do her a wrong. "Tell me one thing," he said, folding her uplifted hands in his, and looking into the very depths of her beseeching eyes, "are you slaying my happiness at the bidding of any other man? Is it some spiritual director, so-called, who has brought you to this?"

"There is no one," she answered. "I have sought no direction for a long time now, not since I gave myself to you. It is my own conscience that I have obeyed, but oh, so tardily and reluctantly!"

"It was only the example, then, of that" —

"You are thinking of Mr. Morecumbe," she said with some vivacity, "but you need not. I know nothing of him now. He is a good man, but he, too, was very young, you know. I could never have followed Mr. Morecumbe — long."

"Do you mean," cried Amory, with what would have been sharpness in any one less urbane, "that the step he has taken would not content you, — that you crave the authority and the assurances of that other church, — that you would divide yourself from us yet more deeply?"

"I hardly know." Ruth rose to her feet, still keeping fast hold of his hand, and went on with a remarkable mixture of steadfastness and modesty. "I have sometimes thought that my way lay there. To be a sister of charity, to receive first of all the thorough discipline that only that church can give, and afterwards, while I lived, to be able each day to relieve in the wisest manner some atom of the world's great suffering,—I have dared to hope that this was my vocation. I could never have been the best kind of wife, Amory, for the best man in the world. But I do feel the need of religious instruction by some one authorized to give it, and you must not let it distress you too much if I seek it now."

He rose to his feet and stood beside her, but could not immediately speak. She waited for a moment and then went on, more timidly and entreatingly: "And I shall be in no haste. We have had — only think! — more than a year together; and in spite of all the shocks and sorrows, it has been a year of such happiness! Perhaps we shall even have another."

He raised her hand to his lips then, and murmured, suppressing a groan, "God's will be done!"

"Oh, my love," she answered, embracing him with sudden fervor, "if we are united in his will, what can ever part us?"

Nevertheless, before the summer came round again, the sacrifice was accomplished. Ruth came within the sphere of one of the celebrated Catholic converts of the time, a man of great sanctity said some, of great subtlety said others, but, by common consent, of deep experience and extraordinary power, and it was under his guidance that she passed out of the sight of those who had sunned themselves for a little while in the mild radiance of her chastened youth.

Not until the deed was done did Amory suspect that, by the help of her elder guardian, she had made him very rich before she left the world, bringing only a comparatively moderate dowry to her convent. It belonged to the almost fantastic refinement which had ever characterized the relations of these two, that the wealth with which he was thus endowed came to Amory Wallis laden with no restrictions, and charged with no responsibilities. All the more strictly did the chivalrous legatee regard it as a sacred trust, to be administered on behalf of the mother and daughter, at whatever cost of labor and caution to himself, for the benefit of the poor.

The efficiency of the work in which he now engaged was greatly enhanced by the practical wisdom of Mrs. Rothery, who made for him once more, as when we knew him first, some semblance of a home. Yet the old days had come back with a difference. The life of this man had been mightily deepened and broadened by the charge which had been so tragically thrust upon him,—by what had been given him and then taken away. So long as Judge Ford lived, he was much with him, and in the last illness of his old colleague he tended him like the most devoted of sons. The social circle of which Amory had once been the darling saw little of him after this, and it talked less. His work and his walk were with the lowly, like hers whom he saw no more.

To Ruth many days had been appointed upon this earth. Her service is not yet ended. But Amory died at fifty, of rapid and virulent disease. When he was gone, and that gallant figure was no longer seen about the streets of his native town, men began suddenly and warmly to praise him. They remembered his unalterable graciousness, his impeccable honor, the unpretending devotion with which he had served his country in her hour of peril, his peculiar sorrows, the many good deeds of his latest days. He had a great funeral, and something like a cloud of incense arose about his name.

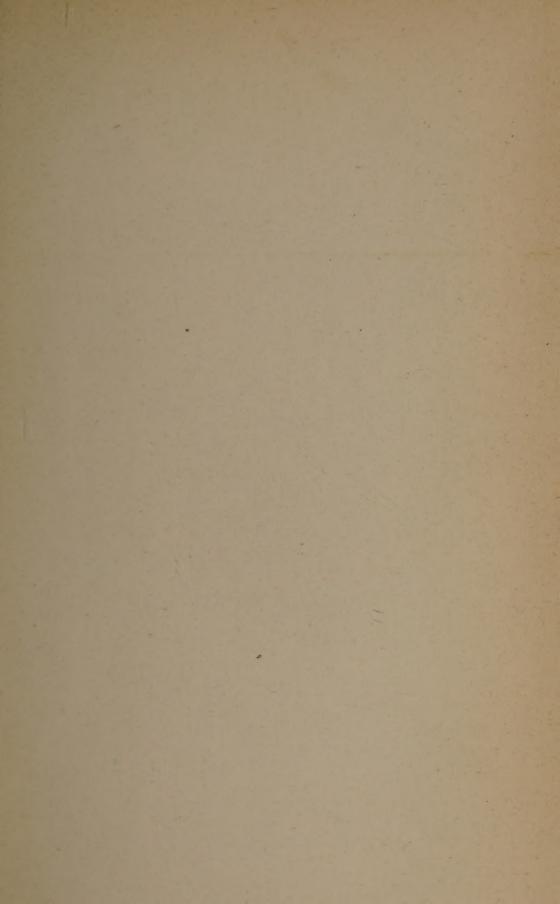
"The dead alone are great.
When heavenly plants abide on earth,
Their soil is one of dewless dearth;
But when they die, a mourning shower
Comes down and makes their memories flower
With odors sweet though late."

There is often much of sentimental exaggeration, as well as of uneasy self-reproach, about these quick reactions of posthumous popularity. He who had lately passed away, was only a weak man whom wrestling had made strong; a sensitive and self-indulgent man who had learned to endure hardness; a man of delicate nerves who had not shrunk from heavy cares, nor from penetrating the loath-liest haunts of human woe in the hope of carrying comfort there. If Judge Ford had been living still, he at least might have remembered, and possibly acted upon, the single word that Amory had ever spoken which betrayed anything like a preoccupation about what men would think of him after he was gone.

"When all this is over," he said one day, "it will make no difference here. But I half think I would like it to occur to some survivor of mine to write upon my grave-stone that line out of Marcus Aurelius: 'Depart, then, satisfied; for he also who releases thee is satisfied.'"







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